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December 16, 1890.

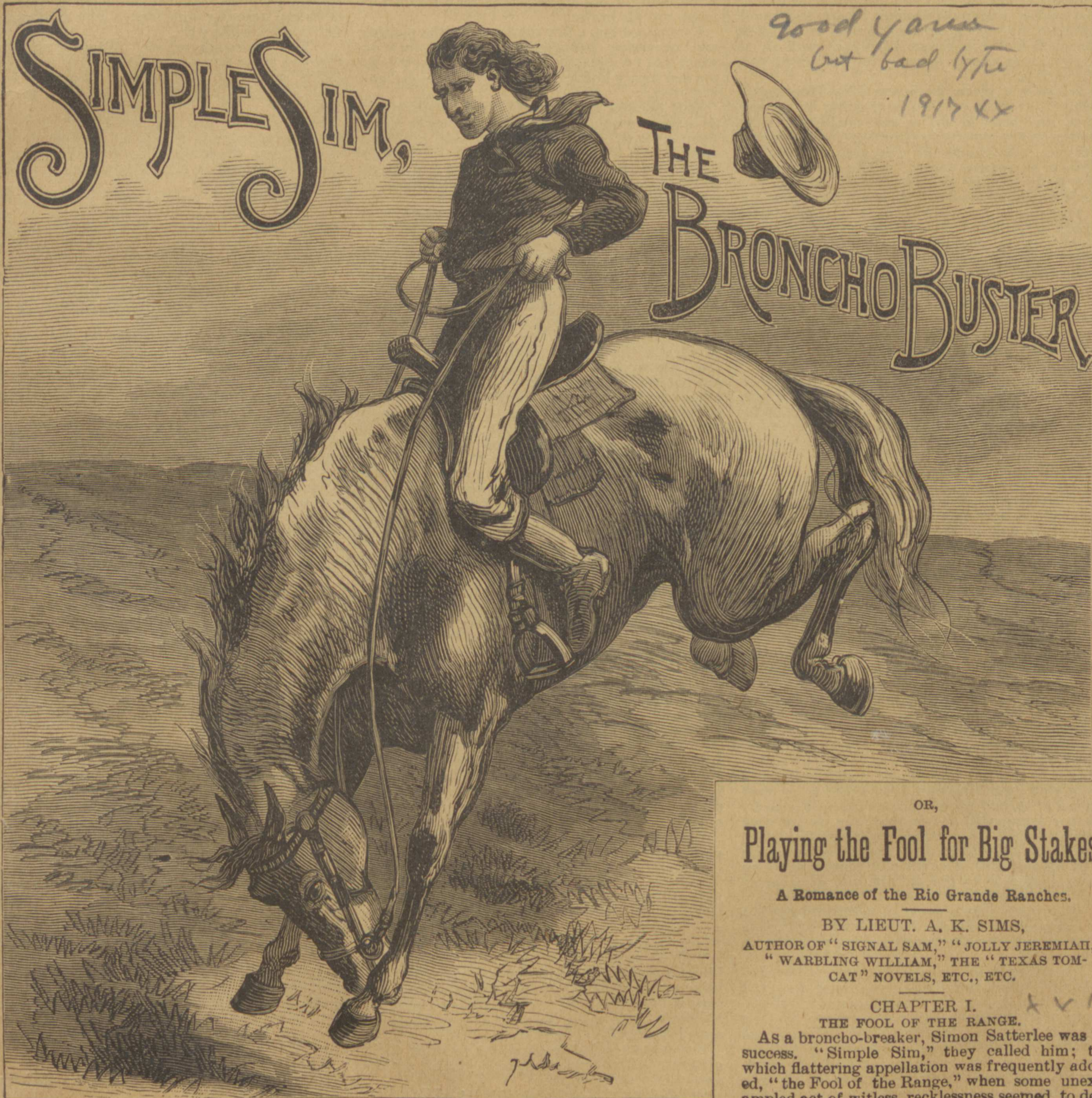
No. 699.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXVII.



OR,

Playing the Fool for Big Stakes.

A Romance of the Rio Grande Ranches.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,

AUTHOR OF "SIGNAL SAM," "JOLLY JEREMIAH,"
"WARBLING WILLIAM," THE "TEXAS TOM-
CAT" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FOOL OF THE RANGE.

As a broncho-breaker, Simon Satterlee was a success. "Simple Sim," they called him; to which flattering appellation was frequently added, "the Fool of the Range," when some unexampled act of witless recklessness seemed to demonstrate that absence of caution and reason which is supposed to characterize a fool.

THE BRONCHO HAD BECOME SUDDENLY TRANSFORMED INTO AN INFERNAL MACHINE,
BALL-JOINTED, SINEWED WITH STEEL, AND RUN BY ELECTRICITY.

His skill in the difficult and perilous work of broncho breaking had secured him a situation on the ranch of the great cattle baron, Giles Huntington, to which place he had come, scarcely a month before, with nothing in his stomach and less than nothing in his general appearance to recommend him.

Huntington's ranch lay on the American side of the Rio Grande, in one of those overgrown counties of Southwestern Texas which contain enough land for a State but barely sufficient population for a township. There was, however, plenty of water in the river and oceans of grass on the ranges, the only two things absolutely necessary to make cattle grow fat; so that Huntington and his cowboys cared little if the sole other indigenous and prominent products of the soil were Greasers, mesquite and cacti.

The advent of Sim Satterlee had furnished a new source of interest and amusement to the people of the ranch. They had never beheld another quite like him. The ingenuousness of his simplicity, the seemingly utter lack of discretion he displayed on all occasions, the artlessness of his speech, and the good-humored way in which he received the ridicule the cowboys constantly heaped on him, gained him friends from the beginning.

For days he had done nothing but break and manage bronchos; and now, mounted on one of the wildest and most vicious beasts the ranch afforded, he was exhibiting his skill to the great delectation of the ranch people, as well as to many others, drawn there by the fame of his performances.

In the first place, there was Giles Huntington himself, swarthy of face, easy-going in disposition, and reputed to be the wealthiest cattle owner on the lower Rio Grande. Near him was his wife, Emily, and his daughter Mildred; the former a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman, the latter a very pretty girl of twenty, with brown eyes, a sweet mouth, and a vivacious air.

There were many Mexicans in the picturesque group of spectators, the most of them being cowboys from the neighboring ranch of Charles Irwin. Irwin, "bearded like a pard," stood in their midst, his black, flashing eyes roving from Simon to the party about Huntington and back again, with a restless expression. He was not a handsome man, and the sharp glances he sometimes bestowed on the young ranch foreman, who stood near Huntington, did not add to his good looks.

"What makes 'em call a chap like me a 'broncho-buster'?" Sim queried, with a puzzled expression, as his steed desisted momentarily from its vicious bounds and leaps. "'Pears to me if they's any bu'stin' done, the broncho is the critter what does it."

It was the first thoughtful question Sim had given utterance to since his arrival, and was consequently greeted as the best joke of the season. There were many facetious replies, but they were drowned in the vicious squeal by which the broncho announced that the performance was about to recommence. The beast was not subdued; it had only been taking a breathing spell.

"Look out for him!" yelled the foreman, warningly.

The caution was unnecessary. Simon had already locked his long legs beneath the animal's belly and braced himself for the inevitable shock.

It came, with a jar that made the earth tremble. The broncho had become suddenly transformed into an infernal machine, ball-jointed, sinewed with steel, and run by electricity. With a spring that might have been envied by a panther it had leaped into the air, shaking its head wildly and writhing as if determined to tie itself into a knot, and then landed with feet close together, legs as stiff as iron bars, and back arched like a camel's. And no sooner did its feet touch the earth than it repeated the maneuver again and again. But it could not unseat the man who clung to it so tenaciously, and discovering this it recklessly threw itself upon its back.

With the agility of a cat Simple Sim leaped to one side as the broncho came down; but, when it arose with another scream, he was again in the saddle!

Then there were leaps and bounds, indescribable contortions, prancings upon hind feet and fore, pitchings and curvetings scarcely to be imagined by one who has not seen the bucking broncho on his native heath—all the tricks and artifices of which those animals are capable!

"Simon is not doing so well to-day!" Huntington observed, in an undertone, to his wife and daughter. "I knew this broncho would give him trouble, but I thought he could conquer it. None of the other boys could ever do

anything with it, and I'm afraid he's going to fail, too."

The fear of the worthy ranchman was premature. The Broncho-Buster had only been permitting the maddened horse to play with him for the amusement of the spectators, seeming to consider it his duty to furnish sport for the friends and guests of his employer. All this was evidenced a few moments later.

Vaulting lightly to the ground he caught up one of the animal's fore feet and drew it tightly against the breast. Strange to say, this simple expedient seemed to divert the broncho's mind from its recent exploits. A horse can retain but one impression in its brain at a time, a fact observed and made use of by every successful trainer from Rarey down. This alone, however, will not account for the success of these trainers. A good trainer, like a poet, is born and not made.

Simon was an expert, evidently; and while holding the foot of the animal pressed against its breast, he talked to it soothingly, combed out its mane with his fingers and passed his hand gently over its face and nose.

It had been trembling like a leaf when he first grasped the foot, not alone from exhaustion, although it was well blown, but from terror. He would have begun in this soothing manner had it not been for the desire for display which had crept into his brain.

It required but a few moments for the panting and quivering broncho to discover that no harm was intended it; and with this knowledge pressed firmly home, the victory was more than half won.

Still holding the foot, Sim passed back along its side, stroking in a caressing way as he went, the large eyes of the animal following his every movement. Then he retraced his way to its head, pressed the other foot against the breast in the same way, and repeated the strokings on the other side.

Within ten minutes the broncho had apparently forgotten its recent scare, and even ventured to rub its velvety nose against his ragged coat in a fondling way. Then, with pattings and low, coaxing words, the Fool climbed cautiously into the deep, double-girthed saddle. He did not at once urge the animal forward, but seated quietly, continued his soft strokes and soothing words. Then he bent his body forward, and the broncho, seeming to understand the nature of the movement, walked slowly around the inclosure. It was a revelation in horse-breaking to the assembled cowboys, whose sole idea of the conquering of a horse was to wear it out and crush its spirit; and the cheers they sent up, as they witnessed this marvelous success, made the gray prairies ring.

Simple Sim had not yet reached the full triumph of his skill. When the broncho had circled a few times, and before the cheering had ceased, he arose lightly to his feet; and, standing erect in the broad seat of the saddle, urged the now docile brute into a gentle canter.

There had been cheering before, now, there came such a wild burst of applause that the very air seemed startled.

The slow canter was increased to a gallop, which became momentarily faster. And when the broncho was sweeping around the inclosure at full speed, its hoofs clattering, and a cloud of dust half enveloping it, the Fool of the Range placed one foot on its haunches and the other on the saddle-horn, and permitted the bridle to fall loosely against its neck! Then, with low whistlings and calls he urged it on; and when the flying broncho rushed by the group of amazed and bewildered spectators, he bowed awkwardly, while a smile of delight expanded his wide mouth. A few feet further he dropped to the earth, the broncho stopping almost as quickly.

The delighted cowboys streamed through the gate and over the barbed-wire fence, pressing proudly about him and lavishing upon him their encomiums. It was an ovation such as the Fool had probably never received before. Eulogistic praise had not been his meat and drink, as seemed evidenced by the childlike ecstasy with which he appeared to accept their laudations.

"'Twas pretty good!" he declared, thrusting his arm through the bridle-rein, and reddening pleasurably as he led the broncho slowly about for the delectation of the enraptured cowboys. "I don't reely think they's many as could 'a' done it better."

But when the ladies advanced to offer their congratulations Simon's swelling words degenerated into mere gasps.

"'T-t-twa'n't j-jes' nothin' 'tall! I 'low I've done better a thousan' times."

And then he flushed guiltily and seemed to de-

sire to sink into the earth as this modest and deprecatory statement was greeted with roars of laughter.

CHAPTER II.

IN WRATHFUL MOOD.

"You're a scoundrel, sir!" and Taylor Wingate, the foreman of the Huntington Ranch, glared hotly at the man he had addressed.

This was Charles Irwin, the proprietor of the "C I," a ranch lying further up the valley. Angry words had already passed between the two, and they seemed on the point of blows.

Irwin was not only a ranch-owner—a fact to confer honor in that section—but the sheriff of the pathless leagues known as Calaveras county. His herds were not as numerous nor as imposing as those of Giles Huntington, but this lack was more than made up, in his estimation, by the dignity of his official position. Hence, when Huntington's foreman, who had but recently risen from the ranks of the common cowboys, ventured to place himself across his homeward path and address him in wrathful mood, he became exasperated beyond measure.

The subject, too, was one calculated to touch him to the quick. He had not been unmindful of the beauty of Mildred Huntington. Few men ever were, for she was confessedly handsome. And the equality of their worldly stations had recently emboldened him to approach her in a loverlike way.

"You're a scoundrel, sir!" Wingate repeated. "If you were not you would respect the young lady's wishes in this matter. No gentleman will force his attentions where they are not wanted."

Irwin's dark face blackened with hate, his form trembled, and he seemed on the point of riding down the steed of the foreman. But he recovered himself, while the blackness gave way to a yellowish pallor.

"No doubt you have a lot of your villainous cowboys within reach of your voice or you wouldn't talk so fresh, my young whipper-snapper!" he snarled, dropping a hand carelessly toward the revolver that swung against his hip.

If he thought to "get the drop" on the foreman he was disappointed. Few men were more watchful or quicker of movement than Taylor Wingate.

"Now, you're coming round to my way of thinking!" the latter declared, swinging his own weapon forward with a warning click. "We might as well settle this little affair once for all. That's why I intercepted you. You insulted the young lady again this evening!"

"I did not!" Irwin protested. "I've as much right to pay court to the young lady as you or any other man. This is a free country, and I'm not used to being dictated to by cowboys!"

"Isn't it an insult to press your attentions on a woman when you know your very presence is distasteful to her? Bah! What's the use of argument? We understand each other, without words. We'll put a hundred yards between us, and then charge, firing. Dare you do it?"

"You think you'll kill me, so that you can have things your own way!" Irwin sneered, that black look of hate again sweeping across his face. "Well, I refuse to fight you on any such terms. I warn you, however, to look out for yourself in the future."

"A coward's way of dodging a difficulty. You have hurled a warning. Listen to mine: If Miss Huntington complains of your distasteful attentions again I'll thrash you within an inch of your life!"

Taylor Wingate was not given to the cool measurement of words, and had a temper that upon occasion became fiery and ungovernable. Nothing was further from the desire of Mildred Huntington, when she casually mentioned to him that Irwin had again been pressing his unwelcome presence upon her, than that her lover should become her belligerent champion.

The fact that he was her lover, however, and had been accepted as her future husband, was all the warrant Wingate wanted for the adoption of such a course. He held it to be not only his right but his duty to protect her from these flagrant insults, for such he conceived them to be. And so, without speaking to any one of the thoughts that stirred him, he had ridden beyond sight and hearing of the ranch, determined to settle with Irwin in his own own peculiar way.

"You've been appointed the young lady's guardian, I reckon!" tauntingly. "I hadn't heard Giles say anything about it!"

Wingate's eyes flashed fire. "That will do, Irwin!" in a voice that was hoarse and trembling.

"I thought I'd ask Giles!" mockingly, seeing that the words stung the young lover into a

state of delirious rage. "It may be, though, that I can ascertain by an examination of the records down at the county seat."

With a bellow of anger, Wingate grasped his heavy stock-whip and spurred his broncho at Irwin. The latter's pistol flashed as the circling whip-lash hissed in the air. But the bullet sped wildly, and the curling lash wound itself like a red-hot wire about the ranchman's burly shoulders. A succession of blows fell like rain, each biting through the heavy coat like knife-trusts.

Irwin was not made of pugilistic metal. If he had been, a revolver duel would have taken place and blood would have flown long before that. But flesh and blood, no matter of what material, could not long nor tamely submit to such humiliation. He managed to grasp the whip, and gave a great wrench in the endeavor to wrest it from Wingate's hands. He was a powerful man; and as the whip-handle was fastened by a loop to Wingate's wrist, the latter was dragged bodily from the saddle and fell with a crash to the ground.

Instantly Irwin flung himself upon his enemy like a maddened beast; and drawing a heavy knife aimed at Wingate's breast a furious blow. The young foreman turned the point by throwing up his arm, and the keen-edged weapon was buried hilt deep in the hard soil.

By a sudden upward movement the prostrate man hurled his assailant backward, tearing his grasp from the haft of the knife and preventing him from regaining it. Then the two, locked in deadly embrace, rolled over and over in a frightful struggle for the mastery. Irwin was much the strongest, but Wingate was sinewy and agile as a panther. For a time the balance seemed to poise evenly. Then it turned in favor of the black-browed ranchman from up the valley.

A dexterous twist had enabled him to grip the young foreman's throat, and at the same time free himself from his embrace. Remorselessly he tightened his clutch, choking his adversary into a state of partial insensibility. Then, panting from his tremendous exertions, and with a fiendish glare in his eyes, he began drawing the young man toward the knife which remained fixed in the ground a few feet away.

There can be little doubt that in another minute Wingate's cord of life would have been cut. There was a trampling of many hoofs! They were near at hand, too, though Irwin, blind and deaf with the fury of vengeance, heard them no more than he did the rustling of the wind. The desire for the blood of the man who had assaulted him centered in itself every sense and emotion.

Not until he was seized and dragged roughly backward was he aware that others had come upon the scene. Then he raved and stormed for his freedom like a madman in the hands of his keepers.

They were his own cowboys, these who had prevented him from committing murder; who, after a day of jollity at the Huntington Ranch, had been cantering leisurely along the homeward trail.

"Let me go!" Irwin howled, wholly beside himself. "The scoundrel assaulted me, and I'll have his life-blood for it!"

Wingate was slowly regaining consciousness. The words reached his ears, aroused him, and he sat up—evidently not quite certain of his condition and whereabouts.

As recollection dawned the stagnant arteries bounded and a hot flush came into his face. The situation was peculiarly humiliating.

"I presume I owe my life to you!" he said, addressing the men who were restraining Irwin. "You have my thanks."

Spots were flying before his eyes and his brain held a sickening giddiness. However, he staggered to his feet, looked at the knife sticking in the ground and then glanced toward his horse, which had ceased staring at the new-comers and again fallen to nibbling the grass.

Irwin was still struggling in the arms of his cowboys and glaring his hate, but reason was beginning to reassert itself and his struggles were more in the nature of bravado than from any real desire to get at his opponent.

Wingate began likewise to feel that he had made a fool of himself.

"I'm willing to fight or let it pass!" he averred, speaking this time to Irwin.

"No more fightin'!" declared the cowboys. "We sha'n't allow it. We don't know what the row's about, ner we don't keer; but you've clawed each other enough for one round."

The Texas cowboy is not usually averse to witnessing a fight. But they readily foresaw that the killing, by their employer, of the fore-

man of the great Huntington Ranch, or even a continuance of a feud between the two, would bring about many unpleasant complications.

"We ain't a-wishin' to inquire into the cause of this hyer trouble, Mr. Wingate," respectfully asserted the spokesman, "but we're bound to see that it don't go any furdur. So, you'll oblige us by climbin' onto your hoss and headin' him toward home. We'll see that the sheriff comes with us, peaceable as a friskin' lamb."

There was the sternness of a command in the tones.

Wingate glanced at the now silent and passive ranchman. After which he turned slowly, mounted his broncho, and without a backward glance rode away.

"I'm a fool!" was his mental asseveration. "Holding the position that I do, I ought to be kicked for letting my temper get away with me in that style. There's a cowardly streak in that Irwin. Just enough to make him as dangerous an enemy as a man ever had. Ten to one, he'll waylay and assassinate me if he ever gets half a chance."

As for the ranchman, riding homeward with his cowboys, no rattlesnake ever held beneath its venomous skin a poison more rankling than that which seethed in his inmost heart.

CHAPTER III.

A LOVE-LORN LASS.

WHILE this stormy scene was being enacted, Simple Sim Saterlee was sitting quietly in the bunk-room, to which he had retired after the triumphs of the day. The feverish heat was giving place to the balmy coolness of a perfect night. For more than an hour he had been the center of a noisy, good-humored and congratulatory throng. His jolly laughter had risen as a constant witness of the fact that this new-found glory was a perennial delight.

His face was a study, as he sat tilted back in one chair and with his feet resting in another, his gaze wandering constantly from the belongings of the apartment to the red glow of the dying sunset.

The apartment was a large one, capable of accommodating all the cowboys of the Huntington Ranch, though Simon was now the sole occupant. There were bunks innumerable, a goodly number of chairs and some benches and tables. At one end a wide fire-place yawned like a black cavern, a few sticks of charred mesquite resting on a bed of gray ashes. Every thing denoted a provision for comfort, with little care for scrupulous cleanliness, not to speak of the elegancies of life.

It was evident, however, that Simon saw nothing of the contents of the room, though his gaze seemed constantly turning from one bit of furniture to another. The light in his eye denoted an introspection that blinded the vision to outward objects. On his broad face sat the seal of perfect self-content. Occasionally he gave way to a silent chuckle.

Believing himself alone, he was revolving the exploits of the afternoon. But if alone, he was not unobserved. A dark face was peering at him through a chink in the walls of the building. The owner of the face lay concealed in a growth of weeds, and the cold and crafty way in which he observed Simon showed that he held for him no kindly feeling.

Suddenly the Fool's chuckling was brought to an abrupt end. The door of the bunk-room opened, and there glided into the apartment a female figure, at sight of which the humorous light died out of the Buster's eyes, and his heavy jaw dropped.

No doubt he had cause to dislike the woman who now approached him, notwithstanding the fact that she had been the most boisterous of the throng in the afternoon's approbation. She was tall and ungainly, with a spare figure, light eyes and wispy, sandy hair. Not a beauty by any means; though from the self-satisfaction she often manifested one would be inclined to think she so believed.

She was the personal servant of Mildred, and as such was something of a privileged character on the ranch.

"You here, Mister Simon!" she cried, drawing back with an apparent start, which was, however, too feigned to deceive even the hard-headed Simon. "Lord! who'd 'a' thought it? I was jes' comin' to set the bunks to rights."

Sim smiled hopelessly and disconsolately and at a loss for words—edging away from her as she again advanced and plumped herself down by his side.

"It does a body good to see you by yerself onc't in awhile," she purred. "It do indeed; specially after the crowd and the worrit. I've

jes' worked myself to a frazzle, to-day, and laughed till I'm sick. 'Twas most as good as a play er a story."

Plays and stories were Nancy Hackett's delight. Of the former she got to see few enough; but of the latter, her little trunk was so packed that it was fairly plethoric. They were all of the chivalric, English school, dealing with knights and priests, and lords and ladies, who were always going about on milk-white chargers and gray palfreys, the lords and knights knocking people on the head in a very heroic way, giving such splendid opportunities for the women to weep and the priests to pray over the victims. And then those handsome knights were always running away with high-born maidens in a style that was supremely delightful; and their fathers—that is the maiden's fathers—always pursued too late to prevent the inevitable weddings, but just in time to witness the conclusion of the wedding ceremonies, and whisper, hollowly: "I forgive you, my children; I forgive you! Go, and be happy!"

There were no sir knights and milords along the prosaic Rio Grande. In lieu of them Nancy mentally confessed that cowboys would do; but the cowboys were not of her way of thinking. They laughed at her immoderately, got up practical jokes at her expense, and showed anything but a disposition to abduct her in the manner of her dreams.

And so she was forced to turn to the Fool of Range, whom she had proceeded to clothe with a thousand heroic attributes. His marvelous feats of the evening had almost pinnacled him above those doughty and romantic souls whose deeds she had so admiringly followed in the pages of her favorite novels. To her fancy the inexpressive face and wide mouth now took on a strange beauty and the blankness disappeared from the eyes.

"He ain't a lord ner a knight," she whispered, eying him askance, "ner he ain't a fool, if them blackguardin' cowboys do call him one. He's got more sense'n any of 'em, for they ain't a-one could 'a' rid a broncho like that."

All this time Sim was leaning from her, as if wishing himself a thousand miles away, yet fearing to retreat.

"The cowboys says 'et you must put somethin' on your hands to be so powerful winnin'. They 'lowed mebbe 'twas musk?"

"Naw!" declared the Bu'ster, twisting uneasily.

"I most knowed you didn't," with a sage toss of her head. "'Twouldn't be necessary."

The compliment was so delicate, in spite of its directness, that it entirely escaped the comprehension of the Fool.

"Yer jes' nacherly winnin'! That's what I says to Milderd. Says I, speakin' of the broncho-breakin'—he's jes' nacherly too winnin' to live. Things can't help follerin' him."

The Fool's jaw dropped still lower, while distress and dismay were written in every feature.

"Why don't you talk to me?" drawing back with a coquettish toss of her head. "You wouldn't have a body do all the talkin', would you?"

"Naw!" repeated Simon, groping feebly for a way out of the dilemma.

"O'course I knowed you wouldn't," encouragingly. "The fellers in the stories never does, you know. It don't look well, from the maiden's side."

"Naw, it don't!" declared the Bu'ster, decisively.

"Tell me somethin' 'bout yerself," edging close to him again. "'Bout yer airy life, ye know!"

If Simple Sim was strong in any line of conversation it was in personal reminiscence, a fact of which the crafty Miss Hackett was fully aware. How many times, since arriving at the ranch, he had recounted the story of his life, no one knew; but it must have run into the scores.

"Tain't much!" Simon averred, though a sense of greater ease and confidence made itself visible in his very manner.

"But you hain't never tol' me!" pressing yet nearer. "An' if anybody'd ort to be int'rested, I 'low its me."

"Yes!" assented Sim, groping after the disconnected threads with which memory bound him to the past, and not thinking of what he was saying. "But 'tain't much!"

"But the multiplication tables! They're jes' beautiful!"

"Yes," he assented, as if getting a firmer foothold on the swimming earth. "I know all of 'um by heart; and weights an' measures, an' the rule fer cube root! Teacher said I was a good 'un for gettin' things by heart. 'Twas back

in Greenbrier county, Wes' Virginny. Lemme seel. Once one is one; once two is—

"'Twas a little, ole log school-house, with a mornin' glory over the winder! Once two is two! An' I had to walk a mild a day, right through the woods!"

"Mus' 'a' been dreadful!" Nancy sympathetically simpered.

"'Twas! Once three—an' they was a groun'-hog made his nes' under an ole stump; an' me an' Jim Larkins smoked 'im out onc't an' killed him."

Was he forgetting that Nancy's presence was distasteful, engrossed in these juvenile recollections!

"But, when my brother Tom got his foot cut, then I had to 'tend to the pigs an' chickens an' sich, an' couldn't go to school no more. An' they was one ole gander that'd fight jes' like a bull-dog. He whupped me ever' time I went to the stable, jes' nigh about. But I got 'im one day. I tied a fishhook to a wire, put a grain o' corn on it; and the ole fool he swallowed it. Then you better b'lieve he got tame! I could jes' lead him anywhere!"

The grin of childish pleasure was again distending the wide mouth.

At that moment the swarthy-faced spy on the outside became convulsed with laughter, and uproariously kicking his heels in the air, dislodged a loose plank, which fell to the ground with a clatter.

"The boys is a-comin'!" and recalled to a sense of his position, the Buster leaped ungallantly from his chair while Nancy Hackett smothered in her handkerchief her hatred and disgust of the entire cowboy tribe, and marched straight from the building.

CHAPTER IV.

A PAINTED FACE.

THE man who had so startled Simple Sim and Nancy, suddenly ceased his convulsive laughter, drew the weeds more closely about his head, and flattened himself like a badger. He did not arise when they had left the building, but remained concealed until the shadows of night began to gather. Then he slipped from the dangerous vicinity and hurried off into the gloom.

If any of the occupants of the ranch could have seen his face and witnessed his singular actions they would have been sorely puzzled, for he had been among the spectators who had howled themselves hoarse that very afternoon. He was of low, Mexican lineage, on evil bent and serving a villainous master.

It was an hour afterward when Taylor Wingate returned, crestfallen and depressed in spirits. There was little in the misadventure of the evening to give him comfort. The cowboys were gathered in and about the bunk-house, singing songs, laughing, cracking jokes, and discussing the great sport of the afternoon. The Broncho Buster was with them, swelling with pride, and answering their jests in his feebly facetious way.

There was a small room set apart for the foreman, and to this Wingate went as soon as he had turned his broncho into the corral and put away his saddle and bridle. He was in no mood to mix with the hilarious throng. Nor did he even, at that moment, care to pay his customary visit to his betrothed.

On gaining his room he almost immediately disrobed and went to bed. Not to sleep. His pulses were bounding too feverishly for that. But to think over the words that had passed between himself and Irwin, and of the savage combat that had followed.

The minutes slipped into hours; the voices of the cowboys droned lower and lower and then ceased altogether; the innumerable noises of the night became stilled. Through the open window he could watch the soft radiance of the stars, and the patches of cloud that now and then darkened the sky.

With the speeding of the hours his thoughts became quieter and followed more placid channels. The soft breath of wind that came up occasionally from the mesquite brush that stretched away from the building had a lulling effect; and he dropped into a refreshing slumber.

From it he was aroused by loud outcries, succeeded by scattering reports of fire-arms. One bound placed him at the window. Freshly kindled flames were curling along the outer walls of the ranch-house and of the building he occupied! Wild bellowings and a confused trampling of hoofs showed that the herd which had been rounded-up for branding had been thrown into a stampede. To these sights and sounds were added fierce shouts and savage yells.

"Indians or Mexicans, or both!" he muttered, slipping hurriedly into his clothing.

Then he bounded through the doorway, and

hurried to where the cowboys were rallying around a self-constituted leader. Directing a number of them to extinguish the fires, he sent a messenger to the ranch-house to learn if any harm had befallen its occupants. The messenger had scarcely started, however, when Giles Huntington appeared on the scene with the assurance that all were safe. At this Wingate placed himself at the head of the remnant of the cowboys and raced after the stampeding cattle.

Perhaps the most wildly excited of the lot was Simple Sim. His face wore a grave and unnatural expression of seriousness, which at any other time would have been ludicrous. Hatless, and with hair flying in the wind, eyes rolling, and his breath coming pantingly, he urged his horse on with voice and heel. Either he had the fastest broncho or was better able to get speed out of one of the little brutes, for he quickly drew in advance of his companions. In one hand he swung a heavy revolver, which he occasionally circled around his head to give emphasis to his vociferous yells.

The other cowboys paid scant heed to him, intent as they were on reaching the rascals who were running away with the cattle; and soon the darkness hid him from their view.

Simon seemed not to notice that he had left them behind, but continued to push his steed, circling to the right of the cattle as he drew near. For some cause a half-dozen of the frightened long-horns became separated from the main bunch and went off at a tangent, being followed by a single rider. This occurred just as Sim reached the laggards of the herd; and with a yell louder than any to which he had yet given utterance he dashed in pursuit of this lone rider.

The latter gave a quick, backward glance as he heard the cry and the pounding hoofs. A feathered head-dress arose above the face, which was the painted one of a Comanche warrior!

The day of the horse-stealing Comanches lay largely in the past. The power of the tribe had been broken, and most of them had been removed to distant reservations; but there were a few remaining who led a vagabond existence and herded with the vilest class of Mexicans, as noted for thieving as the renegade red-skins themselves. Raids by these "Greasers" and Comanches had been all too frequent of late.

The persistency and fearlessness with which Simple Sim hung at his heels had a demoralizing effect on the painted rascal. He speedily abandoned the cattle, and turned his attention to saving himself. Simon had been overhauling him at a startling rate, but, relieved of the cattle, the Comanche again pulled well to the front, heading for a spur of hills which put out from the river and were known as the "bluffs."

The race promised to be a long one. What the Fool expected to do should the Comanche be overtaken did not appear. Perhaps he had no definite idea. All his being seemed centered in the wild passion of the chase; and he rode as rides the jockey who has hopes of winning the cup.

With frantic energy the savage lashed his willing beast; but, lash and urge as he might he could not widen the gap between himself and the man who pursued. Whenever he glanced backward, which was almost every moment, there was the pursuer bowling along like a relentless fate.

The cattle-thief appeared to have no thought of turning about and giving battle; and, as the separating gap slowly but visibly lessened, a panic seized him. The hills were near at hand, now, and to them he turned, riding furiously for the rockiest gorges.

Simple Sim had given no cry since the cattle had been abandoned, and the chase turned upon the endurance of the bronchos. He rode with head and body well forward, aiding his beast as much as possible, and husbanding its strength for the final spurt. A light, as of fierce excitement, glittered in his now flashing eyes.

Suddenly the horse of the Comanche went down in a cloud of dust; then struggled to its feet and galloped riderless away. It was at a point where the rocky walls opened. Simon drew in on the bridle rein involuntarily, and stared open-mouthed at the spot where the savage had vanished. Then a yell arose to his lips, and he spurred heedlessly on, without an apparent thought that the seeming fall might have been a ruse to draw him to his death.

But, no rifle spurted its flame as he drew near the granite barriers. The flying dust-cloud had vanished with the horse that had stirred it into existence. A faint clatter of hoofs came back on the wind. That was all. Except that the soft brilliancy of the night, which had enabled the pursuer to witness the overthrow of the renegade with almost as much distinctness

as if the time had been noonday, outlined against the dark background of rock and grass a silent and motionless figure.

A look of questioning wonder came to the Fool's broad face. Was the motionless figure in ambush, waiting an opportunity for a certain shot? It seemed unlikely! The shot would have been aimed long before.

With swinging revolver Simple Sim urged his broncho to the side of the fallen savage—and looked down on the face of the dead.

With a bewildered air he climbed out of the saddle, at the same time drawing the broncho's bridle-rein over its head and allowing the end to drop to the ground—a maneuver which will hold a well-trained animal in its place as effectually as a picket-pin. Then he strode to the side of the prostrate man.

Curiosity seemed to guide him, for he drew the feathered head-dress away, placed it on his own head, and walked round and round, watching the fantastic shadow which his figure cast on the sward. After which he inspected the singular head-gear carefully; and having apparently satisfied his inquisitiveness, again approached the lifeless Comanche.

A hasty examination showed that the neck of the fallen man had been broken, resulting in instant death. Doubtless his steed had tumbled into a hole, hurling him against the rocks with much violence, and in a way to shatter the vertebra of the neck.

"Done him up!" he whispered, a queer lump coming into his throat. "Most sorry I run 'im so hard!"

He was bending over the body as he muttered the words. Suddenly a cry of surprise came from his lips, and he bent still closer. The removal of the head-dress had left bare a circle of white skin running around the upper portion of the face!

At this discovery the Buster glanced about as if uncertain what to do. Not far away one of the few springs of the region gurgled into a little rill and wound its way to the river. To this spring he hastened, scooped up a quantity of the water in his hat, and returning with it washed off a portion of the paint that concealed and disfigured the dead face.

The features thus revealed were those of a Mexican. The man was the one who had watched Simon and Nancy that evening through the loosened chink in the wall of the bunk house!

"Well, if I mayn't be switched!" gasped Sim, the bewilderment in his face deepening. "Tain't an Injun 'tall! It's one o' them blame Mexican cowboys what hangs up at Irwin's ranch. If 'tain't may I be e't up by rattlers! He was over to our place this very afternoon, too!"

The problem thus suddenly presented was evidently too much for him, for he scratched his head awkwardly and stared again and again to make sure his vision had not deceived him.

"Jes' beats all how he come to be among them Injuns, an' rigged out that way! Should think he'd 'a' been afraid of sich a lot of 'em! Wouldn't never ketch me in a crowd like that. Likely they captured him on his way home, painted him up that way, and made him go 'long of 'em. An' that's why he shied off from the crowd. Cut sticks at the fu'st chance. An' me, like a blame igit, a-howlin' after him an' a-skeerin' him out'n his boots, makin' him think the Injuns was a-go'in' to take 'im ag'in. An' hyer he run into the rocks an' jes' bu'sted his-self. Law! Law!"

Having thus lucidly and satisfactorily accounted for the presence and appearance of the Mexican, Simple Sim heaved a sigh that shook his lank frame as the blast shakes the cottonwood. Then, after a long survey as if to assure himself he was unseen, he doffed the head-dress and replaced it on the head of the Mexican; after which he hid the features by daubing with clay the portions from which he had washed the paint.

"I calc'late the feller won't never want his frien's to find an' rec'nize him in a rig like that! Shouldn't, if 'twas me, shore! Sing'lar! Sing'lar!"

And still stumbling over the mystery, he proceeded to roll the body to the bottom of the gorge, there to heap stones over it and leave it with the spire of rock above as its monument.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNGALLANT LOT.

TAYLOR WINGATE and those with him, following the main band of the marauders, had pressed them so closely that the cattle were abandoned, and the rascals scattered and sought safety in flight. But not until they had forced a portion of the herd over a precipitous bluff, resulting in the crippling and killing of a large number.

The cowboys had continued the pursuit, but

Wingate turned back toward the ranch-house. He gave as a reason that his services might be needed there, when in reality he was actuated by a tormenting desire to ascertain how Mildred had borne the fright and anxiety of the night. He was in a very savage mood, too, as he pushed homeward through the darkness of the early morning. The loss of the cattle sat heavily on him. It was not the first raid that had been made on the ranch; and probably would not be the last. The recurring question was, how to prevent their continuance?

The cattlemen of that portion of the Rio Grande border had organized for protection against these raids. The action had, however, given very slight immunity.

The location was peculiarly favorable to the raiders. Just across the river lay the untrodden expanses of Northern Mexico, heaped with hills, gullied with ravines, and covered with dense stretches of chaparral and mesquite, which offered the securest of hiding-places. And, besides, the logic of events seemed to indicate that the Mexican authorities were in a manner allied with the outlaws. Certainly, it is to be presumed they were not; but the jealousy with which they guarded against the encroachments of pursuers on the sacred soil of the Aztecs squinted strongly in that direction.

Wingate was sifting away at the questions presented by these thoughts and cantering leisurely along, when, having arrived within two or three miles of the ranch-house, he was aroused by a sound of hoofs and a woman's scream. There was scant light in the hour or two preceding dawn, but sufficient to enable him to discern a group of horsemen, upon whom he had almost ridden without discovery. In their midst was a woman, the one who had given utterance to the scream.

It seemed evident from the course they were pursuing that they had come from the ranch-house; and Wingate leaped to the quick conclusion that they were members of the band of marauders and had remained behind for the purpose of abducting Mildred. Perhaps she had recognized him, even through the gloom! His brain reeled with its tide of emotions.

There was no time for reflection or cool judgment. Setting his spurs against the flanks of his animal, he drew his revolvers, gave a great shout, and charged the band.

"Come on!" he yelled, as if encouraging a body of followers. "Down with the rascals! Push 'em, my hearties!"

He discharged one of his weapons in a quick, rattling volley and gave a succession of cries intended to create the delusion that he was backed by a strong party. The act was thoroughly characteristic of Wingate and of a piece with his general recklessness. Cooler heads would have ridden to the ranch for aid, or followed the abductors quietly, trusting to chance to effect a rescue.

The rascals at once urged their horses into a panicky flight. At this the woman screamed louder than ever.

"I am coming!" Wingate bellowed, hoarse with excitement and anger.

Again the woman's wail floated to him like the moan of a lost soul. A deathly chill closed about the heart of the anguished lover. In spite of his utmost endeavors his broncho was slowly falling behind. It was blown by the long run after the cattle-thieves, while the others were fresh.

"Oh, my God!" he cried, "they're pulling away from me. I can't come up with them. If I had another horse!"

Then, in his great fear, he cursed himself for not bringing some of the cowboys with him; for leaving Mildred at the ranch without his protection; for the stupidity of those who had made her abduction possible. In fact, he anathematized every circumstance, seen or unforeseen, which by any possibility could have contributed to this direful result.

And all the while the abductors were widening the distance between him and them. Soon the darkness hid them from his view; but he could still hear the ringing of hoofs on the hard turf. Presently even this evidence of their proximity died away, and the terrors of silence were added to those of the gloom.

Still he pressed on, spurring his horse cruelly and mercilessly, the echo of that despairing cry ever with him.

How long or how far he had continued in this mad race he scarcely knew, when his straining eyes caught sight of a figure standing in his advancing pathway and wildly waving its arms.

"Is that you, Mildred?" he called, reining in his horse so suddenly that it was thrown upon

its haunches; for a feeling that here was something wrong took quick possession of him.

At this there was another little scream, and the woman, for he could now see that it was a woman, fell to the earth as if in a faint.

"Would Mildred act so?" was the question that assailed him. Perhaps the outlaws had discovered he was alone and were attempting a ruse to draw him within gun-shot and slay him. The affair had a very mysterious look. Where were the abductors? and how did the woman manage to escape from them?

Nevertheless, as a careful scrutiny of the surroundings failed to reveal anything of the men he had been following, he began a cautious advance, increasing his speed as he neared the prostrate object.

"Oh, Simon! an' you'd poke around that way when I was in sich distress! You ain't a bit like them there cavaliers, you ain't; and I'm ashamed o' you!"

Wingate drew back, astonished beyond the power of expression. The voice was that of Nancy Hackett, and from her speech she evidently believed him to be Simple Sim, the Broncho Buster.

"Wh—what you doing here?" he at length succeeded in stammering. "Where's Mildred? And where are those men?"

Nancy Hackett sat upright, swayed her body, and gave way to disconsolate grief.

"Stop that blubbering and try to explain things!" he commanded, filled with a queer combination of anxiety and disgust.

"And it ain't Simon! An' I ain't been rescued at all! And them abductors, after stealin' me out of the winder jest like a story book, dropped me like a hot pertater when they found out I weren't Mildred. It do beat all how ever'thing goes wrong with me!"

The statement conveyed volumes. Some of the marauders had remained behind and attempted the abduction of Mildred Huntington. But in the darkness they had blundered woefully, seizing Nancy Hackett instead, and had not discovered their mistake until they were miles from the ranch-house.

And she, filled with visions of knightly banditti, had enjoyed the whole affair, fancying herself some medieval heroine which an ardent wooer was bearing away to his castle halls! And then, when the chase came, she was changed by her imagination into a lady of high degree borne from her lover's arms by some freebooter who would, perhaps, fight for her, or demand ransom!

The belief that Simon was the pursuer added to the realism of the picture. Simon couldn't pay ransom, but he could fight like a chevalier of ye olden time.

Then had come the discovery of her identity, her abandonment by the ungallant rascals, and the final crushing knowledge that the would-be rescuer was not Simon, and had not been endeavoring to wrest her from brigandish hands.

"And Mildred! She was not with you?" he queried, nervously stamping the ground.

"Mildred? Who'd run away with that little chit?" wrought to bitter anger by his tone and manner.

"Then she's at home, safe!" with a thankful breath of relief.

"O' course she is! An' I'm hyer, with a brute!"

He became silent under this scornful attack.

"It's reely worse than bein' with t'other fellers. They called me an old hag and a squaw, and figgered whether they hadn't better take me along anyway as soap grease!"

"Who were they?"

But, Nancy was again rocking herself disconsolately, and moaning out her grief at the unsatisfactory turn events had taken.

It was impossible to obtain any information from her; so Wingate commanded her to mount the horse, and tucking his arm through the bridle-rein, started on the long tramp homeward.

CHAPTER VI.

A RECKLESS CHARGE.

"I NEVER feel overly safe in a place of this kind!" and the ranch foreman looked uneasily at the chaparral stretching like a brushy sea around him. "And especially on this side of the river."

His sole companion was Simple Sim who seemed to give scant heed to the dangers enveloping any particular portion of the footstool. American and Mexican soil were alike to him.

It was the afternoon succeeding the attack on the ranch, and Wingate had taken the Bu'ster with him to look after some cattle which were believed to have been driven across the Rio

Grande. They had been able to track the animals to the brink of the water on the opposite shore. There the trail was lost, for the banks on the Mexican side were so firm and rocky they retained no hoof-prints.

Nevertheless, they continued on, leaving the river a considerable distance behind, and plunging into the chaparral in the direction in which it seemed most likely the stock would be driven.

"Keep your eyes peeled, Simon! We ought to come on some sort of sign hereabout. Unless the cattle have been driven up or down the river! I've been thinking the rascals would aim for that rocky pass ahead. If they didn't take that, the hoof-marks will begin to show in the softer soil just beyond."

The foreman appeared to have conceived a fancy for the Fool, much to the astonishment of the ranch people. Perhaps Simon's reckless bravery in the pursuit of the previous night had raised him in the foreman's estimation. Certainly no one had responded more quickly to Wingate's rallying cry on that exciting occasion.

"I'm a-keepin' 'um peeled!" Simple Sim declared, running over the ground with eyes spread like saucers. "Can't see a thing, though, 'ceptin' centipedes an' lizards. I do b'leeve they's a million o' them last bakin' the'r-selves on the rocks hyerabouts! Should think 'at a Mexican could live fat byer, if it's true, as the cowboys say, that they eats 'um."

Wingate smiled at the seeming simplicity with which Simon accepted the large stories which the cowboys were constantly dinning into his ears.

"It's iguanas the Mexicans eat, a different kind of lizard from these."

They were leisurely approaching the rocky gorge through which Wingate believed the cattle had been driven, if brought that way.

When within a hundred yards of the precipitous wall, a puff of smoke spouted from an aperture of the rocks, followed by a whip-like report, and a bullet plowed through the foreman's hat, cutting so near the skull that it shaved away a lock of hair.

"Back!" he called, wheeling his broncho as if on a pivot. "It's an ambush! Ride for the river!"

Turning in his saddle, he saw that the other was not obeying. Instead, the face of Simon was working strangely; low sentences were dropping from his lips, and he was fumbling with the handles of the revolvers that swung in holsters at the saddle-bow.

"Ride for the river!" Wingate ordered. "It's death to stay here. We'll get some of the cowboys and come back and give these fellows such a rustle as they never had in their lives."

But if Simon heard, he failed to heed. His weapons were in his hands, now, and his eyes were shining balefully. The man's foolhardiness held the foreman fascinated. Then, even as he looked, he saw the Bu'ster make a quick knot in the riata coiled about the horn of the saddle, give it a hasty turn that formed a loop, and into this loop thrust a foot.

"Do you hear me? Come back!" Wingate again shouted, expecting every moment to again see that puff of smoke and feel the sting of a bullet, or to see Simon go down beneath the shot.

The Bu'ster, turning toward him, smiled broadly and confidently; then threw himself over the broncho's side, after the fashion of a Comanche, and with a wild whoop, charged madly at the rocks. The broncho, with head stretched well forward, tore wildly along, circling as it neared the gorge, so as to interpose its body between the rider and the concealed marksman.

When within good pistol range Simple Sim opened on the point whence the shot had come—a stream of fire and a constant succession of shots issuing from the muzzles of his weapons.

"He'll be killed, sure!" Wingate groaned, rooted to the spot by the daring of the spectacle and forgetting to continue his flight. "They'll shoot his horse, and then he can't get away!"

But, strange to say, no burst of flame came from the rocks. With fierce impetuosity, Simon, having completed a half circle, rode straight at the opening in the wall, yelling like a veritable savage. Then the pass shut him in.

Wingate sat his horse, stupefied by what he had witnessed, and wondering why no shot had stricken the reckless rider to the earth. There were shots after Simon had vanished, but, whether they all came from the pistols of the Bu'ster he could not determine. But, a few moments later, the broncho ridden by Simple Sim came tearing from the pass, riderless!

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The foreman groaned at this proof of the fulfillment of his fears.

"It's as I thought. A regular death-trap. Well, they'll not draw me into it! He's dead, and I can't help him; so I'll look out for myself. No, I can't help him. But, I can avenge him, poor fellow!"

His teeth came together with a snap that showed the deadly nature of his resolve.

Setting spurs to his horse, he rode desperately for the river. This he forced the animal to swim, and then pushed on in quest of a party of cowboys he believed to be in the vicinity. He had directed them to make a search of the opposite shore, to determine if the cattle had not been driven into the water as a ruse, to be afterward turned back to the American side. It seemed unlikely they could be far away. Perhaps they had heard the firing and were even then galloping to his aid.

It required nearly an hour's search, however, to locate them; and a half-hour more to bring them to the point where he had crossed the stream. The cowboys were admirers of a deed of reckless daring such as Simple Sim had performed, and followed willingly enough, anxious to avenge the fate of a man who had been so brave, or to rescue him if he still lived. They had also, in the past few days, begun to understand that if Simon had not intellect in any large quantity, he had many qualities to recommend him to their confidence and esteem.

"Only show us the way," they chorused, "an' we won't leave a grease-spot of the villains."

With much anxious foreboding, Wingate led them to the place where he expected to find the body of the Broncho-Buster. The approach was made with all due caution, as he feared another ambush, and had no wish to sacrifice the lives of any of his men.

To his astonishment nothing was to be seen, when the gorge had been gained. There was the niche from which the dastardly shot had been fired, the opening into which Simon had ridden and from which the horse had darted, and the boulder-strewn pass winding its serpentine course through the hills. But, no sign of the Buster nor of the men who had been concealed there.

The affair had a mystifying look. There was no blood on the rocks, such as one would expect to find if a fatal shot had been given and the body of the slain dragged away. Neither were there any footprints. This last was not strange, when the character of the soil is considered. But it did seem singular that Simon and the men in ambush should disappear without leaving a trace.

"They must have pushed on through the pass as soon as I rode away!" Wingate asserted. "We'll follow, anyway, and see what comes of it. Our horses are rather fresh and he may be able to overtake them. They'll be bound to make some sort of a trail when they reach the lowland below."

This seemed the only course to pursue; and having determined on it, the foreman put his men in motion and hastened along the trail.

They discovered nothing, however, and were as much in the dark when they debouched on the other side as when they had started. The expected hoof-prints did not appear here, the softer soil of the low-lying belt being as barren of "sign" as the flinty windings of the pass.

Hours were spent in fruitless searches; the cowboys beating the entire adjacent country with a thoroughness that permitted nothing to escape. They could find nothing; and Wingate was forced to the reluctant conclusion that the men who had lain in ambush for him, had been without horses, and had escaped by taking to the rocky fastnesses of the hills.

"We'll have to give it up!" he averred at last. "We can do nothing and are just waiting time. Simon is surely dead, and there seems small chance that we can discover and punish his murderers."

Notwithstanding the belief that all effort in that direction was useless, he sent a number of dismounted cowboys into the hills, feeling that he ought to leave no stone unturned. And, with the others, retraced his way toward the river, sick at heart over the outcome of the day's work.

CHAPTER VII.

"A FOOL FOR LUCK!"

BEFORE Simple Sim had completed a half-circle, in that reckless charge, he saw, what was invisible to the foreman, that the pass was held by a single man. Even as he made the discovery, the man scudded from his hiding-place in a niche of the wall, and ran for the concealment

of a ravine. It was at this point Simon gave that terrific yell and raced straight for the gorge.

When he reached it the man was turning a rocky spur in the ravine below. He was running as fast as his legs could carry him, his Winchester at a trail, and only his head and shoulders visible above the chaparral. Before vanishing behind the spur he twisted his head around to look backward, giving the yelling cowboy a good view of his face. It was the face of the ranchman, Charles Irwin.

The Buster gave no indications of surprise or astonishment on making the singular discovery. Everything seemed to come to him as a matter of course. But because of the knowledge thus gained, or for some reason not apparent, he immediately changed his tactics. At the moment, he could be seen by neither Wingate nor the would-be assassin. He leaped to the ground, turned the head of the obedient broncho toward the mouth of the gorge, and gave it a smart cut that sent it flying back toward the river. He then carefully refilled the cylinders of his weapons, hurried into the ravine, and crept with stealthy footsteps in Irwin's wake.

If Simple Sim had known of the encounter between Wingate and Irwin, the shot from ambush would have been given a ready explanation; for it must have been evident to even the stupidest intellect that the ranchman had waylaid his rival for the purpose of assassination. He had failed, and was now fleeing as if for his life.

It did not take Simon long to reach the point where he had seen Irwin disappear. Strangely enough, too, since sending his broncho thundering back into the valley, he had taken to himself all the wariness and caution of a cat. His burning glances constantly roved from covert to covert and from rock to rock. Not a leaf stirred but he observed it, and not a bird chirped but his quick ear caught the sound. From the smiling, good-humored Fool of the Range he seemed to have been suddenly transformed into a crafty, crawling Comanche.

Irwin was not hiding behind the spur of rock, and Simon halted and keenly swept the ravine before pushing further. No rain had fallen for months, and the compact soil gave no indications of the ranchman's progress. There was, however, but one way he could go, and at the same time retreat with any speed. That was directly up the ravine. And, as Simon stared in that direction he caught a momentary glimpse of the object of his search, half concealed by the low-growing chaparral.

"Goin' it jes' lickety-split!" and a smile replaced the intense look that had disfigured the pursuer's face. "Travels faster on Shanks' ponies than if he was straddlin' a bronch', I do b'lieve. I'll have to nacher'ly hump myself to keep in sight of him!"

With this observation, he again writhed forward.

An hour at this kind of work carried him through the hill region. During that time he had hardly lost sight of the ranchman. Yet, from Irwin's movements it was plain the latter had no idea that he was being followed. Only for the first few hundred yards had he been careful to keep himself well concealed. After that he strode along with a bold penance that made trail ing him mere child's play.

The country assumed different characteristics. A high, rolling mesa stretched away from the base of the bluffs. The chaparral gave way to vast expanses of mesquite, interspersed with prairie-like openings. Giant cacti everywhere abounded, and at intervals small groves of gnarled trees offered shelter from the rays of the sun.

Into one of these groves Irwin finally disappeared. Simon could not determine whether he came out of it at the opposite side or not, but supposing that he had, advanced toward the trees. When too late to retreat he saw that the grove held a large number of men and horses. Presumably they were Irwin's men, and no doubt they had discovered him.

Without a moment's hesitation he continued on. A man arose at the edge of the timber, coolly pointed a rifle at Simon's breast, and ordered him to throw up his hands.

"Throw 'em up, or I'll plug ye!" cried the man, warningly, evidently fearing the other might attempt to draw a revolver.

"Up, ye air," drawled the Buster, "high as I can put 'em. If you want 'em any higher you'll have to git me a box."

"Keep 'em up, then, and march into camp!" was the stern rejoinder. "You can do your talkin' to the captain."

"Well, I hain't done nothin'!" Simon protested, as he marched ahead of the threatening rifle.

All told, there were ten men in the grove; and among them Simon searched in vain for the murderously-inclined ranchman. The latter had come in there, and it seemed unlikely he had gone out.

Four or five of the men were Mexicans, the others Americans. Simon had never seen any of them before.

"What's become of the feller that run in hyer?" he asked, glancing from face to face with owlish gravity. "He shot at me back there towards the river, and I've been follerin' him ever sence. Seems to me some of ye ort' 'a' seen him. He was a tallish man, with black hair. I didn't get a good squint at his face."

"Do you know who he was?" asked one of the men, who had been lazily seated on a log.

Simon's ears were keen, and peril had apparently sharpened his wits. The voice was disguised, but he recognized it as Irwin's. Nevertheless, he gave not a sign.

"Naw! he run too blame fast. Jes' cut a streak, when he started. I got a goodish look at his back, though, an' think I'd recognize it. 'Twas a sort of a square back, with broad shoulders and big arms."

"Well, he didn't come in here!" another observed. "You must have been moon-eyed when you thought so. And, now, tell us what you intended to do, if you had caught him?"

"Do?" and Simon howled the question. "Well, I callate he wouldn't shoot at any more men!"

"And what were you doing on this side of the river alone?" the man again questioned, assuming the duty of spokesman of the party.

"Wasn't alone!" sputtered the Buster. "Mr. Wingate was with me; an' we was lookin' fer cattle."

"Well, if we see the chap you've been hunting, we'll tell him to send you his post-office address!" and the fellow laughed loudly at his supposed wit.

"Thankee!" Simon placidly replied. "I'd like to find him reel bad. That's a purty bunch o' horses you've got out there!"

"They're mustangs. We caught them only a few days ago."

"Um-huh!"

"See here! Seems to me I've heard of you. Ain't you the chap that's been breakin' hosses for Huntington?"

"You bet!" and the Buster's mouth expanded with the pleasure of the thought that his fame had extended so widely. "I kin break anything what runs on four legs."

"That's a purty big boast! I don't allow you could do anything with those critters out there?"

Simon looked at the mustangs the man pointed out; then got up, sauntered over to the group and curiously inspected them. They were certainly mustangs—that is, they had once been wild horses and had been caught from some herd. But there were certain marks on one or two that did not escape the Buster's attention.

"I reckon I can handle 'um," he declared, shaking his head egotistically. "I've handled wuss."

A silly grin had crept into the corners of his expansive mouth and he chuckled in a way that was ridiculous. Evidently he had some thought in connection with the mustangs that greatly amused him.

"It won't be no laughin' matter, if one of 'em should break yer fool neck!" the man averred, wrongly interpreting the meaning of the chuckles.

"Naw! 'Twouldn't!" and Simon straightened his face with an effort. "I callate 'twouldn't be no fun!"

The other members of the band were watching him closely, laughing now and then at some pointless remark to which he gave utterance. It was to them an amusing thing to contemplate with what ease he had been outwitted and turned from his search. To all appearances he had entirely forgotten what he came there for.

The mustangs were still half wild and wholly vicious. Only the presence of a number of well-trained saddle-horses kept them from dashing away as the men drew near.

"'Twouldn't be jes' no trick 'tall to break 'um," Simon confidently asserted. "If you'll gimme five dollars I'll fix ever' one so they can be rid easy. That's dog cheap. I 'low they ain't another man in Texas 'u'd do it fer that."

"What do you say, Cap?" and the man turned with a wink to the disguised Irwin—might as well let him go ahead, eh?

Irwin fancied he saw in the prospect an abundance of sport—an opinion shared in full by his comrades, and observing that the men were anxious for an exhibition of Simon's skill, nodded his head in assent.

"If he'll take all the risk! There'll be some broken ribs and maybe a broken neck."

The Broncho, Bu'ster was awaiting the decision with a nervousness very unusual.

"I'll haf to have a saddle and bridle and lariat, an' you'll haf to help me git the critters out from under the trees. I don't keer about gittin' my head bu'sted ag'in' one of these hyer limbs."

The articles asked for were immediately forthcoming.

"If you git a bridle over the head o' one of them you'll do better than I think!" the spokesman observed.

His surprise was great when Simon advanced with outstretched hand and wheedling voice and walked straight up to one of the finest as well as wildest of the bunch. The animal seemed to recognize him as a friend.

"Oh, I'm a-reachin' fer your five dollars;" turning to the men who were watching him intently. "I'll yearn it easy enough."

With a touch as soft as a woman's he smoothed down the tangled mane. The face and nose were rubbed in the same soothing way. While thus engaged he slipped a thumb between the animal's jaws, above the front teeth, forcing the mouth open, and with a deft movement inserted the bit, at the same moment dropping the head-piece over the ears and fastening the throat-latch.

At this there was an emphatic protest from the brute, and it required some time before it could be again quieted and reassured. But Simon worked with marvelous patience. The placing of the saddle upon its back and the tightening of the cinches were the most troublesome. But it was all accomplished in due course, and the broncho-breaker stood ready to mount.

The other mustangs had for some time been curiously eyeing these movements.

"They cal'late they'd like to be rigged up in the same way!" declared the breaker, with a chuckle of deep satisfaction.

He had stated he would not attempt to break the animal there under the trees; and as he now led it coaxingly toward the edge of the grove, its mates followed, with ears laid forward, and sniffing the air distrustfully.

Neither Simon nor the men seemed to give any heed to this very natural movement, though the latter had abundant cause to regret their inattention, when it was too late.

When well out of the grove the Broncho-Bu'ster sprang lightly into the saddle. The mustang trembled when it felt the unaccustomed weight, and appeared inclined to resent it; but the soft caressings of the rider's hand, and the quieting tones of his voice calmed it into submission.

"Git your five dollars ready!" he called, urging it first into a walk and then into a trot. "I'm a-reachin' fer it, strong!"

In a few minutes he reduced the mustang to complete subjection: forcing it to a walk, trot or run as the whim suited him. The men, grouped on the outskirts of the grove, watched him with unfeigned admiration, occasionally shouting a word of encouragement, such as:

"Go it, Simple! I'm a-backin' ye!"

They failed to notice that he was widening his circles and drawing further and further from the trees; also, that the rest of the mustangs, with curiosity as pronounced as an antelope's, were imitating his example.

Such a howl as went up when the awakening came! As the final circle threw the rider almost beyond rifle range, and while the inquisitive mustangs were crowding near, he gave a shrill, whistling call, and headed his steed straight for the bills! The mustangs seemed to understand the character of the whistle, for they all streamed after him with headlong speed.

To the men in the grove the whole thing was an aggravating and incomprehensible mystery. Could they have seen with clearer vision there would have been no mystery at all.

At the first glance which Simon gave the mustangs he had recognized them as the property of old Joe Hunter, a ranchman living a number of miles down the river. Hunter had caught them that spring. As it chanced, Hunter's ranch was one of the first Simon had visited on reaching that section; and while there he had partially broken the mustangs to the saddle and made them obedient to his call, which, of course, they well remembered.

He was reasonably well convinced the men in the grove had stolen the animals from Hunter, and a crafty plan of retaking them crept into his mind. It had been well carried out; and it seemed now impossible that the mustangs could be regained by the thieves.

"I'll go back after that five dollars when I ain't in such a pesky hurry!" laughed Simple

Sim, glancing over his shoulder to see what the rascals were doing.

They had not stood idle. As soon as they understood the nature of the trick, they rushed frantically for their ponies. These had remained quietly in the grove. But the Bu'ster was more than a mile away with the mustangs before they were ready for the pursuit. Then they galloped from the grove, furious with rage and filling the air with curses.

"A hundred dollars to the man that first lays hands on him!" Irwin vociferated, now furious with rage.

He had removed the disguising beard.

"If we overtake him, the scoundrel shall die like a dog!"

But they were not destined to overtake him. His former experience had taught Simon which mustang possessed the most speed and endurance. This one he had selected. The others were almost as good; and being unincumbered kept close at his heels. The race was a long one, ending only after the Bu'ster had safely passed the river. And here the baffled ruffians turned back, realizing that it would be perilous and well-nigh useless to pursue him further.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DEED OF HEROISM.

THE sun was low in the heavens as Simple Sim left the shallow, turbid river behind him, and led his recaptured mustangs in the direction of the Huntington ranch buildings—for he was already on the range over which the baron's cattle roved. Naturally he was in a very jubilant frame of mind. He had outwitted the thieves in a manner that was decidedly superb; and he tried to picture the welcome and surprise with which he should be greeted on his arrival.

"I cal'late they won't be lookin' fer me with an outfit like this!" glancing proudly at the mustangs that were following him so docilely. "I reckon as how ole Hunter 'll pay me the five that I lost by bringin' of 'em away. Cricky! He ort to be glad, too. They ain't a hoof of 'em but's wuth five times that."

Seeing that the thieves had not followed him across the river he dropped into an easier pace, as the animal he was riding was by this time pretty well blown.

Shortly before sunset, when cantering along in this leisurely fashion, he rounded a knoll and came on a sight that sent a thrill of horror through every vein. A bunch of half wild cattle had been recently brought on the Huntington range; and as frequently happens in such cases, they had persisted in avoiding the others and in herding to themselves. They had been reared in the Mexican interior, and had passed a great portion of their lives without seeing a human being—hence scared easily when approached.

What Simon saw was the form of Mildred Huntington; prostrate on the ground, where she had been hurled by her pony, and directly in front of a stampeding band of those wild cattle.

The situation was explained by a glance. She had been taking her customary evening ride, and happening in the vicinity of the cattle had ridden near to inspect them. Some of them, irritated by this approach, had charged the pony. It had wheeled so quickly that she was thrown to the earth.

Simple Sim saw her rise and stare bewilderedly for a moment, and then break into a brisk run. The steers which had charged the pony had passed her by, and the others were tearing madly in the wake of those leaders. But those in the rear were spread out in the form of a fan; and it was plain that one wing of this fan would strike and crush her to the earth, where she must instantly be killed by the trampling hoofs.

It was indeed a situation full of terrible peril.

With an inarticulate cry, the Bu'ster lashed his steed into a furious gallop. To attempt Mildred's rescue seemed running into the jaws of death. He was not the man, however, to coolly count chances and consequences. He saw that, unaided, she could not escape, and therefore threw to the winds all considerations of self.

The mustangs followed with blind obedience for a short distance, but when they saw the maddened cattle, and caught the roar of their trampling feet, they scattered like a flock of frightened sheep. Simon had forgotten them, and knew not whether they were following or remained behind. Had he reflected on the matter he would probably have preferred they should do the latter, as their presence might complicate the difficulties and dangers of the situation.

When he started on that fearful race it seem-

ed almost a hopeless one. The steers were much nearer Mildred, and plunging along at a rate to tax the speed of any horse. But the willing mustang entered into the spirit of the effort, and ran as it perhaps never ran before in all its wild career.

At this juncture the imperiled girl saw the coming horseman, and altering her course ran directly toward him. This change of direction increased her jeopardy, as it brought her nearer the center of the path covered by the herd's advance. But, at the same time, it made it possible for Simon to reach her sooner than if she had continued in the way she had been going.

Simon gave a great shout and waved his battered hat by way of encouragement. She could not hear the shout, but she saw the motion, and it put new life and energy into her flagging steps.

And the cattle, with heads in the air, hoofs jarring like the roar of distant thunder, half revealed and half concealed by a dust-cloud, swept on with the pitiless impetuosity of a tornado.

On the face of the daring mustang-rider was a tense look, and in his eyes a light that banished the usual clownishness of his appearance. He was always a good rider, and now sat on his mustang with something akin to grace, leaning far forward in his earnestness, yet sticking close to the saddle after the fashion of the Western cowboy.

He had to cross in front of the handle or point of the fan and press along the opposite side to reach the girl. As he crossed the point the leaders of the herd swerved slightly in the direction he was taking, as if to crowd him away and make Mildred's destruction more certain. The threatening feet were now not more than a hundred yards from her. The change in the course of the leaders threw the front of the herd into a semicircle of which she was the center.

It seemed suicidal for the cowboy to press between the horns of that crescent of death. Yet he never hesitated, but struck his spurs hard against the flanks of the straining mustang, and gave another cheery cry.

Mildred's strength was spent, and she reeled from exhaustion. But to stop was death. So she staggered blindly on, with gasping breath, her senses swimming, and a blur of darkness before her vision.

Simon saw all this, and urged his flying mustang to still greater efforts. The little beast responded nobly, the inward circling movement giving to horse and rider the appearance of a sea bird dashing for its prey into the combing crest of a wave. A few, only, of those mighty bounds were necessary to carry the mustang to the side of the half-fainting girl. Then the cowboy, without in the least checking the speed of his steed, leaned from the saddle, catching Mildred under the arms as he whirled past.

With a herculean effort he drew her up in front of him and regained his upright position. They were enveloped, now, in the dust-cloud raised by the cattle; and the noise of the crowding hoofs was absolutely deafening. The mustang seemed to understand the necessities of the situation, wheeling and racing away at its best gait as soon as the rescue was effected.

Simon gave a quick, backward glance at the surging sea of hair and horns and fiery eyes. The galloping motion of the herd gave to it a sinuous movement that, under the circumstances, was fascinating, yet terrible.

"A narrer squeeze!" he gasped, turning from this spectacle to the wide-reaching prairie ahead. "The gal's fainted, I 'low. Jes' about another minute would 'a' been too late."

He felt they were safe, should no accident befall. But if the pony stumbled, or any one of a dozen possible mishaps occurred, their lives would not be worth the weight of a feather. Conscious of this, he kept a firm hand on the rein and scanned the route with solicitous care.

By this time the pony was pretty well blown, but it was a plucky creature and kept up that marvelous burst of speed until it was clear of the horns of the quivering crescent.

"Good boy!" said Simon, patting its steaming side. "The best o' Kentucky blue-blood couldn't 'a' beat that. 'Twas a stunner for a race, shore! An' you won!"

The maddened herd had streamed by, at a safe distance, and he drew the mustang down into a trot—then soon he brought it to a full stop. The deathlike stillness of his charge was causing him much uneasiness.

"Hain't hurt, air ye?" he questioned, anxiously, swinging from the saddle and lifting her gently to the ground. "'Twas enough to skeer a body, that's a fac'."

There was in his voice the softness and tenderness of a woman's, showing that, beneath the seeming crudeness of his nature, there throbbed a heart that was warm and true.

Mildred did not immediately revive. On the contrary, it required considerable time and effort to fully restore her to consciousness.

She shuddered when she recalled the peril from which she had been rescued.

"It was a noble and unselfish thing for you to do, Simon!" with an earnestness that could not be mistaken. "I can never, never repay you for it. But you have my thanks! My sincere thanks!"

"Twan't jes' nothin' 'tall!" Sim declared, wiping a bit of suspicious moisture from his eyes and turning away to hide his emotions. "I'd do as much for a Greaser, if there'd come a needcessity. An' now, if you'll 'low me to he'p you onto the back of the critter, we'll jog on. It's gittin' late."

She willingly complied.

"Fears to me it's ruther resky in you to be out hyer, anyway!" as he swung along at the mustang's head. "There's thieves 'crost the river—reg'lar bad 'uns. Had a race with 'um myself not more'n a hour ago."

"Geewhillekins! There's them plaguey mustangs! I clean fergot 'em. An' after takin' 'em away from them fellers so slick! If you'll 'scuse me, Miss Mildred, I'll jes' see if I can't roud 'em up. I'd hate to have them fellers git 'em ag'in."

"No!" urged Mildred, feeling that she wanted him near her, and too weak and faint to question him as to the circumstances. "I'm afraid I can't go on alone. I'm giddy, and—and—might tumble from the horse."

Simon had halted and was scanning the prairie, now growing dark with the approach of night.

"Jes' as you say, miss," tucking the bride beneath his arm. "I callate a woman's worth more'n a good many mustangs. I sh'ud hate to lose 'em, though! There's five dollars in that bunch belongin' to me."

In Simon's estimation five dollars was evidently an immense sum. But he forgot this promise of wealth in other topics of conversation; merging into a stream of commonplace which ended only on their arrival at the ranch-house.

CHAPTER IX.

GREEN-EYED JEALOUSY.

WHEN the accounts of the rescue of Mildred and of the recapture of the mustangs were rendered, Simple Sim received such lavish praise that he was elevated to the pinnacle of earthly happiness.

"Them tricks weren't no small pertaters!" he grinned. "I callate I c'd do 'em better, though, if I had another chance. A body kin allus do a thing better, when he's had experience. It's jes' like hoss-breakin'. A body's got to know how; an' then it takes experience. Knowin' how ain't no good, jes' by itself!"

There was, however, one person on the ranch who was not pleased with all that had occurred; and that was Nancy Hackett.

"Course I wouldn't 'a' had him let her git tromped into a jelly an' all that!" she sniffed, turning stiffly away from the laudatory group. "Law, no! But, it's jes' her luck. Allus a-shippin' down, when they's a man around to pick her up an' set her on her feet, as you might say. Not that I'd think o' insiniwatin' that she done it a-purpose! But it's pesky strange; so it is. Don't nobody never come around reskyin' me when I'm in trouble! That they don't!"

Notwithstanding these mental reservations, it was plain Nancy felt that in some unexplainable way she had been wronged. Simon she considered her especial property; and no other woman had any moral right to place herself in a situation demanding heroic or chivalric conduct on his part.

"An' he's jes' tickled to death because of it; an' hangs right to her skirts like any ten-year-old baby an' never thinks o' comin' near me. An' she's a-praisin' him to his face ever' blessed minute, an' a-tellin' him what a fine man he is, an' a-makin' a reg'lar fool out'n him! I never see sich carryin'-on. That I didn't. An' me no more thought of than if I was the dust under his feet!"

"Well, I won't stay hyer an' see it! That I won't! If she wants him she can have him. But I ain't a-goin' to see myself tromped on like a worm; an' then turn an' lick the hand that done it. Nancy Hackett ain't jes' that kind of a lady!"

And then the troubled creature broke into a

torrent of sobs, as Mildred and Simon chanced to stroll in her direction.

"Why, what's the matter?" Mildred queried, in great perplexity; while Sim flushed and fumbled guiltily at his hat. "What are you crying about?"

"I hain't a-cryin'!" Nancy asserted, straightening up with much dignity. "Ketch me a-cryin'! I wouldn't cry if I was burnt at the stake!"

"But you are! Your voice is trembling, now, so that you can hardly speak. Tell me what it's about."

"I shouldn't think you'd haf' to ask!" with a flutter of fresh indignation. "If you're jes' bound and determined to have him, though, why take him! That's all I've got to say. But I won't stay hyer an' see your carryin'-on! That I won't! I'm jes' as refined an' good a lady as you, Miss Mildred; an' I'd have you know I've got my feelin's though I dessay you won't give me credit fer 'em! You never do!"

For a moment Mildred stood amazed and perplexed; then as the ludicrousness of the situation dawned on her she broke into hearty peals of laughter.

"An' I won't have a little chit like you a-pokin' fun at me, neither!" reddening to the roots of her hair. "It hain't bad enough to steal a girl's feller, I s'pose? but you must go to pokin' fun at her into the bargin'! I hain't a fool, Mildred Huntington! An' I kin see as fur through a grin-stone as some other people, what thinks, mebbe, I hain't got eyes! That I kin! An' fer all yer smartness, you hain't smart enough to fool me. That you ain't! An', so I say ag'in, if you want him, why take him; an' I hopes you'll never live to regret it!"

And, with a fresh torrent of tears, Nancy fled from the room, seeking her own chamber, which she barred against all callers.

The next morning she presented herself before Mildred, all traces of tears washed from her eyes. She was arrayed in her neatest dress; with her extra clothing done up in a little bundle.

"I didn't think I ort to go 'thout lettin' you know!" she said, cold constraint visible in her face and attitude.

"You're not going to leave the ranch?"

"Yes'm! After las' night, I don't think I'd keer to stay longer. I'm a lady, Miss Mildred! An' I've got the feelin's of a lady, if they is some that thinks I hain't!"

Mildred found persuasion and argument quite useless. Miss Hackett's resolution was firmly taken.

"If you'll just wait till father returns!" Mildred urged. "He's out with Simon and some more of the cowboys, looking up those mustangs. Perhaps he can say something to change your mind. And, besides, he has the key to the money-drawer, and you'll want your wages before going."

The reference to Simon was most unfortunate. It kindled anew the fires of Nancy Hackett's wrath.

"Thank you for nothin'! I don't want yer money; an' I wouldn't stay hyer, not if you'd give me a million dollars a week!"

With this resolute assertion, she gave a scornful toss of her head, and with deliberate steps marched away across the prairie, soon becoming lost to view in the groves of gnarled and scrubby mesquite.

She had set her course in the direction of Irwin's ranch, which she reached after a toilsome tramp of many hours.

Irwin was at home, giving some instructions to his cowboys. The only woman in his employ was the wife of one of the Mexicans. This woman Nancy found in the cook-room, to which she marched, without giving the ranchman a second glance.

The black-eyed senora stared as Nancy unceremoniously entered and tossed her bundle on the floor.

"I've come to stay with you a bit!" shrugging her shoulders disdainfully at the untidy appearance of the place. "I can be a sight of help if you'll let me. You need somebody to look after things a little and set 'm to rights."

The cook had never heard of such a being as Nancy Hackett, and flew to the swift conclusion that her domain had been invaded by a crazy creature. With this belief, she whisked from the room and ran frightenedly to Irwin.

"Eb?" said the ranchman, staring as he listened to her complaint. "She's out of her head? I wondered what it could mean when I saw her."

With this, he accompanied the woman to the cook room, and there confronted Miss Hackett, who had taken a broom and was beginning to

stir up a cloud of dust in her initial effort to "set things to rights."

"What does this mean?" he demanded, frowning severely. "You've scared my cook half out of her wits!"

Nancy gazed at the senora with fine scorn.

"Why, I jes' wouldn't stay at t'other place any longer! I can't a-bear that Miss Mildred! That I can't! She's that uppish of late that a body can't live with her."

"Oho! So you've had a quarrel?"

"We might 'a' had, if I'd 'a' quarreled! I jes' tol' her I couldn't an' wouldn't live there any longer. An' so I come hyer!"

"And expect to stay?"

"Stay? Why, I wouldn't go back there fer anything."

"But I don't need you. I don't want you."

"You don't! Jes' look at this room, will ye?"

An amused, yet crafty, look glistened in Irwin's eyes.

"Perhaps you *can* be of some service in helping Juanita! You may remain awhile; that is if you two can get along without fussing."

And thus Nancy Hackett was installed in the ranchman's service.

"She can do no harm," Irwin mused, as he returned to the cowboys, "and she may do me some good. I ought to be able to get a lot of information from her that will serve me well. And her presence will give me an excuse for a visit to the ranch."

CHAPTER X.

MYSTERIOUS THREATS.

BEFORE nightfall Irwin had worked out his plans and was on his way to the Huntington Ranch. He had had several conversations with Nancy—if conversations they can be called—and had gained thereby a very fair idea of recent occurrences affecting Mildred and her lover.

It was the first time he had visited the place since his encounter with Wingate, and he was naturally anxious as to his reception.

"I half wish, sometimes, the boys had let me be, that night," he growled, thinking of the combat. "I had him in my power, then. No one was near; and I don't believe suspicion would ever have pointed to me. 'Tisn't anything so very uncommon for a man to be mysteriously killed in these parts."

Darkness had set in before the ranch was reached. Dismounting a short distance from the horse-corral, he secured his broncho by means of a picket-pin and lariat; then walked leisurely toward the house.

His knock on the door was answered by Huntington.

"Ah! Good evening!" said the cattle baron, with his usual warmth, though he was not at all pleased at sight of his visitor. "Step into the sitting-room. Or, would you like a bite of supper? The table hasn't been cleared away, yet."

"I believe I don't care for anything," Irwin replied. "I had supper just before I started. I thought I'd just drop in awhile for a chat."

He laughed to conceal the slight restraint he felt, and followed the baron into the sitting-room, an apartment framed in airy, ample proportions.

"That Hackett woman flared up, did she?" he asked, stowing his hat in a corner and dropping into an easy chair. "She's about the queerest female I ever run across."

"Have you seen her?"

"Well, I should say! She camped down onto me this afternoon and declared that she was going to stay whether I wanted her or not. I haven't much use for her; but I couldn't very well drive her away, you know."

"Certainly not!" and the baron smiled. There was something indescribably amusing to him in this sudden freak of Nancy.

Huntington seldom let an occasion for smiling pass unimproved. He was a cheery, good-natured gentleman, of the Southern persuasion, inclined to take the world easy and extract from it all the comfort possible. In the past few days there had been much to irritate and annoy him; and Nancy's silly jealousy had given him something to laugh about.

"I don't suppose you could induce her to come back?" Irwin questioned. "Hang it all I wish you could. My cook thinks she's half crazy, and is desperately afraid of her; and if Juanita should take it into her head to leave we'd be in a bad way over there."

"Yes," assented Huntington, laughing till his sides shook. "It was a funny affair all around. I've been joking Mildred about it the entire day. She takes it good-humoredly enough. But you ought see Simon! Just say Nancy Hackett to

him and he flies all to pieces. I don't suppose the cowboys ever will get done laughing at him about it."

"I rather hoped you could think of some plan to get her to return," Irwin persisted. "To tell the truth, that's mainly what brought me here to-night."

"I wouldn't know how to go about it. People can't be made to stay just where they're wanted, in a free country. She was a great help to Mildred, too, in the way of company."

"Speaking of Mildred," said Irwin, after a time of silence. "I'd like to talk to you a little about her, Giles, if you don't object."

A momentary frown came to Huntington's placid features. He was not aware that Irwin had been favoring his daughter with sundry attentions intended to be conciliatory and to pave the way to something warmer than friendship.

"She's a handsome girl and a good one, and I'd like your consent to pay my respects to her."

Huntington fidgeted uneasily, but managed to remain silent.

"You're rich, Giles. I know that. While I'm only an ordinary sort of ranchman. But I'm not so bad off. I've got a snug, little sum in bank; and, besides, my position as sheriff of the county gives me something of a standing. I'd make a girl a good husband, and one you couldn't be ashamed of, if I do say it myself."

"Mildred isn't old enough to think about marrying, yet!" and the perturbed father drummed nervously on the arm of his chair. "She is only a child. It seems only yesterday that she was a baby."

"She is twenty!" declared the ranchman, doggedly, not liking Huntington's tone and manner. "And a girl of twenty is a woman. Old enough to think of such things, anyway. In fact she's been already thinking of them, and to some purpose, or I miss my guess."

Huntington chose not to understand him, and Irwin went on:

"You must know what I mean. Your foreman, Taylor Wingate, is using his position—"

"Stop!" commanded Huntington, a trace of anger in his voice. "If my daughter chooses to accept Wingate's civilities, that is her affair."

"Of course. Only I was in doubt whether you knew of it. If you didn't, I thought you ought to. I suppose it's none of my business. But Wingate lacks a good deal of being her equal in social standing. Why, it's hardly a month since he was only a common cowboy."

Huntington's anger was seldom of a character to last long. He could, firm, however, on occasion; and this seemed an occasion demanding firmness. Nevertheless, out of consideration for a neighbor, he banished the harsh words that leaped for utterance.

"Why don't you go to Mildred? If she's a woman, as you say, she is fully competent to settle all such matters, herself."

"She doesn't take kindly to me," said Irwin, bowing his head. "I have spoken to her several times. I thought you might be able to say a good word in my behalf. I think the main trouble is that she looks on me as old! But I'm not old. Just in the prime of life. But a girl is apt to think a man a Methuselah when he is past forty. You've observed that, no doubt. Now it's my belief that in nine cases out of ten a man of my age will make such a girl a better husband than will one who is twenty years younger."

"Perhaps you are right; but we'll not argue the matter. I always think a woman's personal preference should be the guide in such matters."

"And you won't say anything to her, then, in my behalf?"

Huntington gave a decided negative.

"Perhaps a few words will make you think better of it,"—and Irwin leaned forward and whispered some hurried sentences into the cattle baron's ear.

They must have been of startling import, for the latter fell back, white and gasping.

"How did you come by that knowledge?" staring at the ranchman as if fascinated.

"It's every word true, isn't it?"

"You haven't answered my question!" evasively.

"Well, you needn't say it is, if you don't want to," and Irwin rubbed his hands together and chuckled with fiendish glee. "I know all about it, Huntington; and I'll reveal it if you don't do as I say."

"My God, man! You wouldn't be so cruel? You couldn't!"

"Wouldn't I? You'd better not put it to the test."

The cattle baron was shivering as if struck with a sudden cold.

"If you're a man, Irwin, you'll have some pity on the girl. Don't force me to answer you

to-night. I can't and won't. To-morrow. Any time! But not to-night!"

And with these hasty and anguished ejaculations, he quitted the room; leaving Irwin to find his way from the house as best he could.

CHAPTER XI.

STEALTHY VISITANTS.

SIMPLE SIM SATTERLEE lifted his head from the saddle which served as a pillow, sat half erect and listened long and intently.

"Must be somethin' wrong!" he mumbled. "I never wake this way unless there is."

The wind moaned dolefully through the mesquite and rustled the short, dry grass. The moon was far down in the western sky, and its pale and half-obscured light served but to make the darkness visible. Above, a spray of ragged clouds blew westward, blotting out the stars.

Simon glanced at the silent forms of the sleepers about him. Slumber and blankets enveloped them, and they were dead to matters of sense.

"Wonder if I hadn't better wake Wingate?"

Wingate, as foreman, had charge of the little party which lay camped that night on the broad plains many miles from the Huntington Ranch. They had Hunter's mustangs in charge, intending to return them to their owner, and had been now two days on the route. Half the distance to Hunter's had been covered.

"Pshaw! I 'low there can't be anything wrong. The man on guard wouldn't shorley go to sleep!"

"He was about to lie down again, when his quick ears caught suspicious sounds and movements in the direction of the mustangs and ponies."

"I callate ever'thing ain't jes' as it ort to be!" he whispered, crawling to where Wingate lay and nudging him in the side. "Git up and take a listen!"

Wingate started up instantly.

"Sh! Don't make any noise!" cautioned Sim.

"I thought I heerd a queerish racket among the hosses awhile ago."

Then there came distinctly to their straining ears the tramp of horses' feet on the soft sward; the movement of the sound seeming to indicate that the horses were moving from the camp.

"Quick! Wake the boys!" the foreman commanded. "There's something wrong here!"

He scrambled away to obey his own injunction, and Simon as nimbly imitated his example. Two minutes later every man in the camp was wide awake, and ready for action.

"A couple of you run over and see what's the matter with Jim; the rest follow me! Something must have happened to him. He couldn't fail to hear that, unless he's asleep. And I never knew Jim to sleep at his post."

The mustangs and ponies had been hopped and turned loose to graze, it being reasonably certain they would not stray far. The rapid trampling of feet indicated, now, that they had freed themselves of the hobbles—which was very unlikely—or that they had been released. And if released, then an attempt was being made to steal them.

The cowboy, Jim, had been stationed near them to guard against any such attempt, and to give warning should trouble of any kind arise. His silence at this time was prophetic of ill.

Before Wingate and his followers reached the point where the animals had been hopped they were joined by the men sent to ascertain what had befallen the guard. They came back with him limping in their midst. He had not fallen asleep, but had been stricken down by a stealthy blow from behind, and then bound and gagged.

"Then it's rustlers!" Wingate asserted, in blank dismay. "And they've got every one of our horses!"

What this meant all knew full well, and as one man they rushed forward, hoping to be in time to prevent the rascals from carrying out their scheme to its full extent. Without horses they were as helpless as shipwrecked mariners.

No one bounded away with more nimbleness than did the Fool; and when near enough to make himself heard he gave one of those ear-splitting whistles for which he was famous.

At this the clatter of hoofs increased a hundred fold; and men's voices could be heard urging the animals on.

"Ten to one, they are the very scamps from which Simon took the mustangs!" Wingate panted. "And they've been dogging us for the purpose of getting them back."

But half of his comment was heard, for Simon was sending one blast after another, the vibrant calls cutting the air like the staccato of a locomotive.

It seemed foolish to thus warn the thieves of the efforts they were making. Simon had, how-

ever, trained a number of the Huntington horses to come to him anywhere on hearing the signals. This fact was well known to Wingate and the cowboys; and they waited anxiously to see if on this occasion it would have its usual effect.

The thieves had now abandoned all attempts at concealment, and were shouting and firing their revolvers and racing here and there for the purpose of throwing the animals into a stampede.

"Mebbe we c'u'd bring down some of 'em, if we'd give 'em a volley!" one of the cowboys urged, as he raced at the foreman's side. "Might's well kill a few of the hosses as to have them all git away!"

"No!" said Wingate. "It would only be a waste of time and cartridges. It's too dark to hit a house."

He was hoping Simon's ruse would accomplish its purpose; and was quickly gratified at hearing the thunder of hoofs, as some of the best trained of the bronchos broke away from the herd and came thundering toward those quavering calls.

It was evident, too, that the rascals were having trouble with more of them, and perhaps with some of the mustangs, for they increased their yells and firing, with the evident intention of creating such a din that the whistles of this plains Rarey could not be heard.

Twice some of the animals broke away, judging by the sounds and the galloping pursuit of the thieves. If Wingate's party had been mounted at these junctures, it would have been a matter of comparative ease for them to have dispersed the villains and secured the animals. But the thieves managed to check these incipient rebellions; though they could not bring back the animals that had first broken away.

"Hyer they air!" howled the Bu'ster, from the semi-gloom. "Come a-jumpin', if you want a mount. I've got six, I think!"

The cowboys needed no order. They were racing toward him, even before the words were spoken.

No one had thought to bring saddles and bridles, however, which were at the camp; and much valuable time was lost in obtaining these needful articles. Hence, when they were ready for the pursuit, the sounds of the running mustangs had grown faint in the distance, and the chances of overtaking them in a race were speedily diminishing.

"All we can hope to do will be to keep close to them till daylight," said Wingate, in discussing the matter. "Then we'll have to fight them. There are a lot of Greasers in that outfit, which is so much the better for us. They're great fellows for cunning trickery, but they'll be apt to run at the first smell of burning gunpowder."

There were more men, now, in Wingate's party, than horses.

"If I could 'a' jes' kep' up that squealin'!" said Simon, dolefully.

"'Twould 'a' been a great thing!" declared one of the cowboys, who, having secured a mount, felt jubilant.

"I 'low 'twould!" with naive simplicity. "I callate it wouldn't do any good to try, now?"

He elevated his sharp nose in the air and stared longingly in the direction taken by the thieves.

"If I jes' had a bellus like a steamboat whistle I reckon I could bring some of 'em back, yit. If them plaguey Greasers hadn't 'a' kiyed, I'd 'a' fetched more, when they was closer."

"You did well enough!" declared Wingate, commendingly. "The point now is, who shall go and who shall return to the ranch."

What an Irishman would call "a bit of ruction," was already in progress over this point. It was, however, quickly settled by the foreman, who called out the names of those who were to go back.

"Perhaps it's as well," he said, after hurriedly giving his instructions. "The ranch folks will want to know of this; and besides, these fellows may be entirely too much for us when it comes to a tussle. Tell Huntington to send a strong force to the Rio Grande crossing south of here. There they're to look for our trail, and follow as fast as they can."

No further time was to be lost, for the noise of the running mustangs came now only as faint echoes. And as all were in readiness, Wingate gave the word of command, and with his willing followers thundered away in pursuit.

Daylight found them on the American side of the Rio Grande. The thieves had crossed at that point; and here the cowboys halted for a short consultation. A party similarly situated had gotten themselves into trouble only a few

months before by invading the Mexican territory, in force and without permission.

To obtain this permission more than a day's journey would be necessary.

"We'll risk it!" asserted Wingate, urging his steed into the stream. "These Mexicans have not good horse-sense, or they'd never make such an order, expecting it to be obeyed!"

CHAPTER XII.

A TERRIBLE SITUATION.

FROM a sandy, open space in the midst of a chaparral thicket, issued a series of moans. The hot, Mexican sun blazed from a cloudless sky, causing the scanty blades of grass to droop, and even the lizards to seek shelter from its rays. Scarcely a breath of air swayed the surrounding chaparral.

"Oh, my God! This is terrible! Why didn't the villains shoot me and be done with it?"

The voice was that of Taylor Wingate, and expressed the most dreadful agony. He was lying, bound and naked, across the mouth of a giant ant-hill! The sun was blistering him; and the ants, angered at his presence, were swarming in myriads over his body, biting with venomous viciousness.

It was a situation more to be dreaded than death. The ants were of a large, reddish species whose bite produces acute and tormenting pain. They abound in portions of the West and Southwest, throwing up hills that are frequently several feet in diameter. Plainsmen understand their characteristics; and it is a frequent custom to toss into the craters of these mounds antlers and skulls from which they wish the flesh cleaned. In a few hours the savage insects will have every shred of flesh removed.

And upon such a mound Wingate was lying!

He had crossed the river bravely enough that morning, and pushed with his force to the westward and southward, following the trail of the stolen mustangs.

Toward noon they had reached a point where the trail split into many sections. Wingate believed he understood the ruse, and that a rendezvous had been appointed where the thieves would again unite. Of this, however, he could not be certain; and so ordered his men to separate and follow the trails to their termini.

Along one of them Wingate set out alone, little thinking of an ambush. The trail showed the hoof-marks of a dozen animals. He supposed them to have been made by riderless bronchos and mustangs, driven by one, or at most two mounted men. Great was his surprise, therefore, on riding into this sandy opening to find himself surrounded by a group of scowling villains, who pointed their weapons at him and peremptorily ordered him to dismount.

He had ridden into a trap from which there seemed no way of escape. The path was blocked in front and rear and the almost impenetrable chaparral stretched on each side. And, besides, should he attempt to dash away, his life would very probably be forfeited, for the men were a murderous lot.

With one exception they were Mexicans, brown-faced, low-browed rascals, with a penchant for robbery and assassination. Their animals were not visible, having been concealed further on; and they had lain in the brush like so many serpents, awaiting the moment to strike.

"Get down!" commanded the one American in the group, backing the order with the persuasion of a cocked pistol. "Get down, or I'll blow the top of your head off."

Wingate complied with what grace he could, facetiously remarking that while he kept a head he preferred it whole.

The instant his feet touched the ground he was seized and his weapons wrested from him. Then the American stood over him with threatening revolver while the Mexicans removed from his person every article of clothing.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked, thinking they intended to take everything he possessed and then turn him loose.

"You'll see," was the surly rejoinder. "We've got orders to do you up, and we mean to do it."

At this the noose of a *riata* was tossed over his head and with deft quickness the Mexicans proceeded to bind him, having him well lashed almost before he realized their intentions.

Thus bound he was placed upon the ant-hill; and with mocking laughs his fiendish tormentors glided away, leaving him to face a death of excruciating torture.

"Oh, why did they not kill me?" he groaned again and again. "It would have been merciful kindness compared to this."

Every minute seemed drawn out into an hour, and at times his agony was so great he screamed

aloud. Only the bonds held him, but these had been so cunningly fastened that, try as he might, he could not roll himself from this miniature crater of fire.

He had been there scarce ten minutes, however, when a rustling came from a blind trail leading into the chaparral thicket at one side, and a burro pushed its way through. It was followed almost immediately by a torn sunbonnet. The wearer of the bonnet was about to emerge likewise, but peering around the burro, she caught sight of the man prone on the ant-mound, and drew back with a little scream.

"Oh! my goodness gracious, Pedro! There's a naked man out there, and he's yelling like an Indian! Do run and see what's the matter with him. And here, take this saddle-cloth, and give him your blanket, too. Something, you know, to—clothe him with. It's too hot for you to wear anyhow, Pedro. And do, for mercy sake, be quick!"

While speaking, she had pulled the saddle-cloth from the back of the burro, and thrusting it into the Mexican's hand, again enjoined him to haste.

These rescuers, who had come so opportunely, were none other than Nancy Hackett, and the husband of the black-eyed cook, Juanita.

"Pedro, you lazy thing, why don't you hurry?" Nancy shouted, as another scream came from the tortured man.

And Pedro, at last fully awake to his necessity of haste, trotted across the open space to the mound. A string of Spanish exclamations rolled from his lips as he saw Wingate's predicament.

"*Jesu Maria!* That is bad. It was *el diablo* fix for the señor!" inextricably mixing his English and Mexican.

"Then, catching Wingate by a foot, he unceremoniously dragged him from the ant-hill, threw the saddle-cloth over him to shield him from the sun, and began to untie the cords.

"Cut 'em!" commanded Wingate, impatient and irritable from his sufferings.

"No stiletto," Pedro placidly explained. "The señorita she took him away."

But the nimble-fingered Mexican scarcely needed a cutting instrument. The knots seemed to fall apart as if by magic, and in a second the ranch foreman was free.

With a deft twist Pedro slipped out of the big blanket which, in spite of the heat, he had been wearing, and tossed it over Wingate. With this about his body, and the saddle-cloth twisted about his head to shield him from the sun, he exhibited a costume that was decidedly novel and picturesque. But it answered its purposes very well; and just at that moment he was in no critical or fault-finding mood. The effects of the ant-bites were still torturing him, and to this was added the misery of a painfully sun-blistered body.

He knew the Mexican well, having frequently seen him at Irwin's.

"You have my thanks a thousand times, Pedro. How you happened in this miserable region I don't know, but you came just at the right minute. I couldn't have stood it much longer. Heavens! It's enough to make a lunatic of a man just to think of such torture. But you haven't told me how you came here."

"I fetched him along!" exclaimed Nancy, who was now approaching with the burro, and whose presence Wingate had not previously noticed. "He came meek as a lamb, too. Pedro can tell you that."

"Si, señor!" Pedro acknowledged, with an abashed look. "The señorita is—what you call him—irresist! She say the word and I obey."

"Because he couldn't help himself!" beamed Miss Hackett. "I hope you're all right, Mr. Wingate. I'll tell you about it in a minute. It was really as funny as a book. Ah! Them terrible ants. You must 'a' suffered dreadfully!"

Then, having heard Wingate's story, she proceeded to enlighten him concerning her presence there.

"You see, me and that Juanita jes' couldn't git along a-tall. Such an uppish thing! Why, she reely had the impudence to tell me I didn't know how to cook. An' her jes' a-pizenin' the victuals with pepper an' onions an' sich. Law! the things that woman did cook an' the way she cooked 'em was enough to ruin ever' blessed stomach on the place."

"And that wasn't half my trouble," Nancy continued, leading the way into the chaparral at Wingate's suggestion, for he feared the Mexicans might return. "No indeed! For Juanita took her complaints to Pedro, hyer, and Pedro hadn't any better sense'n to carry 'em to Irwin,

an' then Irwin he fired up an' told me my room was better'n my company, and that I'd ableege him by p'intin' my nose from the ranch an' travelin'."

"That was jes' too much like bein' discharged, that was. Though, law sake! I wasn't gittin' any wages an' was doin' the work of half a dozen lazy things like Juanita. An' so I told him I wouldn't go; an' he couldn't make me."

"An' then he gits this hyer fool Pedro to send for some of his Mexican friends an' carry me off in the night. Er, ruther, 'twas mornin'; an' they dumps me in the sand and chaparral, eight er ten miles back from this. An' there they left me, thinkin' I couldn't never find my way out'n the place."

"Mebbe I mightn't, by myself. But while stumblin' 'round tryin' to find out where I was, I run acrost that fool Pedro, who was settin' on that burro half asleep and makin' fer the river. I had a little pistol in my pocket that the Mexicans never knowed of; an' I p'inted it at Pedro's head and told him I'd like to change places with him. Mercy me! I don't s'pose I could ever 'a' pulled the trigger, even if he'd 'a' refused."

"But he never thought o' refusin'. He jes' clim' down like a little man, an' handed over his butcher knife, an' took on dreadful; an' 'lowed ef I jes' wouldn't shoot him he'd do ever' blessed thing I said."

"An' so I rid the burro, an' made him march and show the way. An' bymeby we heard a tremenjous groanin' an' screechin'. So we come hyer; an' hyer we be. An' that's all they is; 'ceptin' that I'm goin' right back to Irwin's ranch—an' I'm a-goin' to stay there tell the earth turns to melted lead. Hain't I, Pedro?"

"Si, señorita!" confessed the humble Mexican, almost afraid to say that his soul was his own, so complete had been his subjugation.

"I'll have to walk along with Pedro," sighed Wingate, knowing that in his condition every movement would bring pain. "I'm anxious about Simon and the cowboys, too. If I had a horse I'd be tempted to follow them."

The mention of Simon evidently excited in Miss Hackett's breast the liveliest emotions of interest and curiosity.

"Do tell! Is that idjit with them?"

The tones belied the scorn and indifference in her words.

"Yes; and a fine fellow he is," Wingate replied, giving her a quizzical glance.

"I suppose everybody's a right to their opinion!" tossing her head disdainfully. "I can't abear that Simon—I jes' can't! I don't see how anybody can!—specially a woman what's got as much sense as Miss Mildred. But I allus said they ain't no accountin' for tastes. Go 'long there, you lazy thing—go 'long there!"

She had been assisted to the back of the burro; and now from sundry whacks from a huge stick proceeded to belabor the beast into a crawling gait and satisfy her vindictive feelings.

CHAPTER XIII.

STRANGELY CAUGHT.

WHEN Huntington's cowboys severally reached the point where the divided trails reunited, they were made anxious by the non-appearance of their foreman. A half-hour was spent in vain waiting; and then the suggestion was ventured that they go on. From the looks of the trail it was evident they had made marked gains on the thieving party; gains which were certain to be lost if they tarried much longer.

Simple Sim, in spite of his sobriquet, the Fool of the Ranch, was really the leader of the party. His marvelous success in venturesome undertakings, and his reckless bravery, naturally pushed him to the front in enterprises surrounded with peril.

"You lead on, and we'll do the head-figgerin'!" said one of the cowboys, bluntly. "Likewise of which they won't be much to do. It'll be mostly hard knocks an' hard fightin' if we overhaul 'em; an' hard ridin' tell we do."

His statement of the case seemed certainly correct. A straight-away chase with a lively scrimmage at the end of it was apparently all there was to "figger" on.

Simon's mouth expanded in a pleased grin at this evidence of good will on the part of his comrades. Nothing could have suited him better than an offer of such leadership. The implication of lack of brain power failed to strike him. Placed at the head of a charging party he cared not who planned or directed the assault.

"I'm willin'!" he declared, with all the simplicity of a modern Barkis.

It was reasonably certain Wingate could meet with no difficulty in following them; and so the

cowboys rode away at a brisk gait on the trail of the mustang-stealers. The temporary halt had been of considerable benefit to their animals, as was shown by the increased speed with which they flew over the ground. In less than an hour they came in sight of the retreating force; and then the Fool of the Range pushed the pursuit with an unparalleled fire and energy.

The marauders were manifestly thrown into a panic by the approach of the cowboys. The stolen mustangs hampered them; for instead of riding directly on they were occasionally compelled to ride from side to side to keep the herd from scattering. In addition there were laggards that had to be urged, for the mustangs were becoming hungry and evinced a disposition to nibble at the grass along the way. So that, altogether, their speed was much lessened; and at a time when delay was both vexatious and perilous.

"Push 'em!" cried Simon, emphasizing the order with a victorious shout. "The beggars are as skeert as coyotes, a'ready!"

The thought gave him an elation of spirit that was unmistakable. It shone in his eyes, thrilled in his voice, and by a subtle contagion communicated to his men, creating in them something of his own impassioned ardor.

A glance made it patent that the fleeing men outnumbered them almost two to one. But this fact was wholly unheeded by Simon's excited followers; and, strange to say, this knowledge of the inequality of the parties seemed not a source of encouragement to the pursued.

The country through which they were passing was somewhat rugged, but beyond lay a narrow and apparently open plain, which on one side ran up to a series of rocky hills.

A strange and puzzling thing happened when the outlaws reached this plain. The mustangs and saddle animals began to act queerly, stumbling blindly about as if endeavoring to extricate themselves from a quagmire, and now and then falling.

The pursuing cowboys instinctively reined in at this sight, at a loss to understand what it meant.

"Can't be a trick to draw us on, I reckon?" one of them queried.

"I dunno!" said Sim, staring wonderingly. "Makes me think o' the time Jim Reeder, back to Virginny, throwed a lot o' kittens into the swamp. Them kittens acted fer all the worl' jes' like them hosses."

The trouble of the mustang-stealers was obviously increasing, the animals struggling and plunging in a manner painful to witness. Some of the riders had leaped down and were apparently engaged in an endeavor to release them.

"Tain't zackly clear what's the matter with them chaps; but they're in a fix. Don't take no operry glass to see that. An' now's our time to crowd 'em."

A flush of excitement mantled the homely features of the Fool, and as he gave utterance to these thoughts he again pushed his broncho into a swinging gallop. The willing cowboys streamed after him, fingering their weapons and anxious for a fight.

This dash greatly disconcerted the thieves who had been working energetically to free the animals. For a little while it seemed they meant to make a stand. They threw out a rear guard; which sent a volley at the approaching horsemen.

The fire was promptly returned by Simon's men; and with such energy and accuracy that the guard fell back in confusion. At this the entire body of thieves fled in wild disorder toward the hills, abandoning their own horses as well as those which had been stolen.

This ignominious retreat was received by the cowboys with wild cheers.

"Whoop 'em up!" shouted the Bu'ster encouragingly, lashing his broncho into a still swifter pace. "I'd like to capture a lot of them fellers jes' to see who they be."

This they were not destined to accomplish, however. The hills were impassable to horsemen and so rugged that pursuit was well-nigh useless. It too nearly resembled the chasing of partridges in the mountain. There were a hundred deep defiles and shadowy gorges, too extensive to be thoroughly searched and capable of safely secreting scores of men.

Notwithstanding this an effort was made to trail and rout the rascals, but it ended in failure.

In the mean time their own animals had been left in charge of a single man.

When they returned they found the mustangs and saddle-horses of the thieves in an apparently hopeless condition. They had not been mired in a bog; but had floundered into a brambly ex-

pause, where the low-growing scrub was matted and tied inextricably with a mesh of trailing vines. These had looped and twined about the legs of the poor beasts until they could neither advance nor retreat. The most of them had ceased all efforts at escape, and many had sunk to the ground in the passive despair that horses evince under such circumstances.

"I wouldn't make a bad trap fer elephants or bufflers," Simon sagely observed, as he viewed the meshed animals.

"Oh, walk into my parlor," said the spider to the fly!

"Tis the purtiest little parlor that ever you did spy."

"I used to know all of that air piece; an' it's a good 'un. Teacher said I could say it fine!"

This little disquisition had been unheeded by the cowboys, who were hurrying to examine, and if possible release the prisoners.

They found the latter task one of no small moment. Many of the brutes had wallowed a considerable distance into the trap. To extricate them it was necessary to cut a path with knives to the open ground, a work requiring much time and patience. Then the binding vines were sawn from the limbs of the captives; after which they were assisted to their feet and cautiously led to a place of safety.

It was high noon by the time they had all been freed; and a meal was cooked and eaten and the animals allowed to rest and graze before commencing the return journey.

Much anxiety was felt at the failure of Wingate to appear. It seemed probable some mishap had befallen him, for with so plain a trail he could not easily have gone astray; and burdened with apprehension they started to retrace their way toward the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PECULIAR EXPERIENCE.

TAYLOR WINGATE, with the blanket worn poncho fashion, and with the saddle cloth bound like a turban about his head, presented a decidedly ludicrous appearance, as he led the way toward the river, followed by Nancy and the Mexican. Just at that time, however, he was caring little whether he looked well or ill, ludicrous or charming. The bites of the ants had produced an intolerable itching which was only equalled by the pain of the sunburns. But he had his freedom, a horrible death no longer menaced him, and in his good right hand he swung a small revolver, Nancy's weapon. All these were circumstances for which to be devoutly thankful.

He had checked his incipient worryings about the cowboys by the assuring thought that they were at least able to take care of themselves, and if fighting was to be done, no better leader than Simon could be chosen.

"We'll make for the ford where the thieves crossed with the mustangs," he had said, "and then keep a sharp lookout for the boys from the ranch. Huntington will start them out as soon as the messengers arrive. We can't look for them, though, before to-morrow, and they may not get here then. They'll be apt to crowd things, however, knowing they're likely to be needed."

"We can get water when we reach the river, but the question of something to eat may worry us. Perhaps I may be able to pop over a jack rabbit; and if not we can eat the burro!"

Pedro combated this murderous suggestion with a disapproving shrug of his shoulders. The burro was his;—and therefore valuable.

It was mid-afternoon when the river was reached. The shallow, muddy torrent seemed to have risen somewhat since the passage of the morning, presenting an impassable appearance. Many of the flat sand-bars were submerged.

"It's plain we can't cross here!" and Wingate looked at the turbid waters in blank dismay. "There's been a rain in the hills somewhere to the northwest; and I think the river is still rising. Pedro and I might swim it. But Miss Hackett—"

"Oh, mercy me! no. I couldn't swim any more'n a stove. Might as well tie a stone to my neck and throw me in, and be done with it. I'd go to the bottom one way jes' as quick as the other."

"We might make a boat out of the burro!" and Wingate laughed at the alarm visible in Miss Hackett's countenance. "All you'd have to do would be to hold on. You couldn't drown a burro if you'd try."

The bare suggestion struck terror to her trembling soul. This was worse than the first proposition. No, she could not swim; neither would she trust herself on the back of a swimming donkey.

"I'd as soon resk a mus'rat. It's a'most as

big and a good 'eal useter to the water. Why, if that bur' should once git its ears full it'd go down jes' like a chunk. You don't ketch me on the back o' no sech cre'ter."

"There was a time when men—"

Nancy, recalling the deeds of her legendary heroes, was about to launch into a recital of the marvelous things these Leanders would probably do if similarly circumstanced; but checked herself, feeling the rehearsal would be throwing words away.

"Tain't no use to waste your sweetness on the desert air!" soliloquizingly and with a skyward tilt of her freckled nose. "Fellers nowadays won't understand these things, no way you put 'em."

As none of the party desired to remain on the Mexican side of the river a search was commenced in the scant hope of finding some means of crossing. The banks were in most places rocky and along them sprung a scattered growth of *pinones*.

In a stony basin hollowed by an inward whirl of the waves and where the leaves of a large *pinone* cast heavy shadows, Wingate came upon a most unexpected object. It was a rudely constructed skiff, and swung lazily at the end of a long rope which ran back under the edge of the cliff where it seemed to be moored to the roots of a tree.

The point at which the dripping rope disappeared had a look suggestive of cavernous depths; but of this at the time the foreman gave no thought.

"Just the thing!" he exclaimed, waving his hands excitedly to Nancy and Pedro, who were dallying along the water's edge. "As old What's-his-name said, 'I've found it!'"

"Found what?" Nancy screamed back, obviously fearing the ranch foreman had taken sudden leave of his senses. "I hain't seen a blessed thing but rocks and scrub pine."

"That's because your location's wrong. One can't see through a hill, you know. Come up here."

He smiled jubilantly, feeling, that under the circumstances he had a right to smile in spite of the fantastic appearance of his attire.

Miss Hackett and the Mexican scrambled up the slope in obedience to this summons, leaving the burro to nibble contentedly at the scanty grass.

"Oh, it's a boat!" and Miss Hackett gave a gasp of astonishment.

"Yes, and there's an oar in it. So, if you two will just climb in, I'll follow. Then Pedro can cut the rope, and I will paddle the craft to where the burro is. We'll try to get him to go with us, and if he won't he'll have to remain here until the cowboys return."

The Mexican and Nancy had stepped into the crazy craft, and Wingate did likewise. He had no sooner taken his seat, however, than the rope was drawn taut and the boat began to move slowly through the water in the direction of the cavern-like place beneath the roots of the tree.

The occurrence was so startling and mysterious that the ranch foreman dropped the oar, and Pedro, who had been standing with stiletto ready to sever the rope, let the weapon fall with a clatter to the bottom of the boat.

"Oh, oh! what can it mean?" quavered Miss Hackett, visions of robber knights and medieval bandits flashing across her mind.

As for Pedro he gave a howl, and leaping overboard splashed wildly shoreward.

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Wingate, almost as perturbed as the questioner. "But we'll find out, pretty soon. There's something or somebody tugging at the other end of that rope."

"What if it should be bears?" Miss Hackett tremblingly whispered, seeming on the point of imitating Pedro's example.

"Keep still!" and the foreman drew and cocked the tiny revolver. "There's a queerness here that I'm anxious to look into. Don't say another word, please, unless I give you permission. This rope runs into a hole back there, and there's some one in it."

His words were firmly spoken, but his face was quite pale. The unknown is always the dreaded. More than once he had been tempted to cut away the boat and drive it out into the river. But each time his curiosity gained the ascendancy, and he remained silent, eager to solve this strange puzzle. He was well aware that his inquisitiveness might cost them their lives, and if more time had been given for thought he would probably have chosen the safe course of flight.

Slowly the boat cut athwart the current and moved in under the shadow of the *pinone*. Here a semi-darkness prevailed, and objects were barely

distinguishable. The nose of the skiff grated on a sandy bed; and as Wingate arose to his feet and took a step forward a frightened exclamation came out of the gloom.

"It's a man!" sputtered Miss Hackett, apparently thinking the human biped more terrible than the dreaded bears.

On hearing the explanation Wingate had leaped past her; and the sounds of a combat now came to add to her dismay. But she arose above her fears, and with unexpected bravery followed him.

"There!" said the foreman, rising from the struggle. "I'm afraid I cracked the fellow's skull. It's a Greaser, and what he is doing in here goes beyond me. He tried to run by me when I jumped out of the boat, but I got hold of him and we had quite a lively tussle."

That the Greaser was not dead, however, was quickly evident. Even while the foreman was speaking he raised his head and glared at them with beady black eyes which shone strangely in that place.

"See here!" Wingate ejaculated, advancing and towering over him. "We don't want to stay in here any longer than we have to, and the faster you answer the sooner you'll be rid of us. You understand me?"

"Si, senor," with an undisturbed drawl.

"Well, then, what were you doing in here, and what did you mean by towing that boat outside? And why did you draw in on the rope as soon as we were seated?"

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders, but remained silent.

"You'll have to answer, and might as well be in a hurry about it!" thrusting the revolver into his face.

The man recoiled at sight of the deadly tube, and sent up a string of prayers and protestations.

"What was the boat out there for?"

"*Camarados!*"

"Oh, for some of your friends? And you couldn't see it from here and thought we were your friends, and so drew it in? But why didn't you know better, when you must have heard us?"

"Sleep!" rubbing his eyes to indicate his meaning.

"That will account for it. I hadn't thought of that. And where are your friends?"

"With the mustangs."

Even before the answer was given the foreman had leaped to a realization of the truth. By mere chance he had stumbled upon a secret hiding-place of the men who had stolen Hunter's mustangs, and been guilty likewise of the many recent raids along the Rio Grande. The man left in waiting had expected some of them to return soon and allowed the boat to drift to the edge of the adjacent bluff for their convenience, as the cave could not be approached from above.

Then, like a true Mexican and lover of *siestas*, he had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER XV.

A FRUITLESS SIEGE.

FURTHER questioning on Wingate's part served to substantiate this theory. But the Mexican would not or could not tell the name of the leader of the organization. He was of the peon class, this Mexican, with no very high grade of intelligence—a mere conscienceless tool that could be made very useful in the hands of a daring and unscrupulous man. The kind of a tool that will, if commanded, undertake an assassination with no more twinges of feeling than if the being to be slain were a snake and not a man.

When further attempts at obtaining information seemed useless the foreman passed the revolver to Nancy and requested her to watch over the peon while he took a look about the cave.

"But for goodness' sake don't be too long!" Miss Hackett grumbled. "I don't like the looks of this hyer place, noway; and them he was talkin' about is liable to come at any minute."

The foreman had not failed to reflect on this latter danger. Should the mustang-stealers return, their situation would be rendered extremely precarious. The rifles of the thieves would block the way to the river; and to remain within the cavern would be to court starvation.

"You are right," returned Wingate. "I'll not spend more than a minute or two in the search."

On the stony floor were a few charred sticks in the center of which a half-live coal burned like a hot and sleepless eye. Wingate crossed the sticks over this and blew them into a little flame which served to light an area of a few feet.

Some weapons and a torch were found hanging on the wall. The latter he appropriated; and lighting it at the sputtering flame, started on his tour of investigation.

The cave was much larger than he had supposed it to be, consisting of several good-sized chambers. In one of these he found some articles of clothing which he hastily exchanged for the poncho blanket and turban of saddle cloth.

"I don't like to take anything without paying for it," was his mental comment. "But a fair exchange is no robbery. They took all my clothes, as well as my horse and weapons. If I should take everything there is here it wouldn't make us even, for these rascals don't seem to go in for luxury."

He only took the clothing, however, together with a revolver and knife. The other articles were too cumbersome and valueless to waste time on—and a few minutes of time just then might mean a great deal.

When he returned to the entrance he found Miss Hackett crouching at the Mexican's side with the revolver pointed threateningly at him.

"He begun to wiggle jes' as soon as you was gone," she remarked, triumphantly, "and I tol' him if he didn't keep still I'd nacherly blow the top o' his head off! An' after that the creeter didn't onc't bat his eyes."

"We'll want to move him from here," declared the ranch foreman, who had hastily formed a plan of action. "I found a bit of rope back there with which we can tie him. Then we'll put him in the boat and carry him up among the rocks somewhere."

The Mexican looked at him with stoical indifference as the rope fell with a swish upon the rocks. Just a single ray of interest glinted in his eyes as he noticed the changed attire of his captor. But he uttered no word of protest against the programme which had been outlined.

Miss Hackett guarded the peon with the coolness of a veteran as Wingate proceeded to tie him, giving a threatening shriek now and then as she fancied she detected rebellious symptoms. The foreman, like most cowboys, was skilled in the construction of knots, and it took him but a few moments to so bind the Mexican that escape was impossible.

The latter was then dragged to the water and lifted into the skiff, and when all were in readiness it was pushed into the whirl of the channel and allowed to drift to its first position, where it remained swinging at the end of its cable.

The peon was then, with Miss Hackett's assistance, carried to a hiding-place among the rocks above. Here he was left under Nancy's guardianship while Wingate scaled the further heights to discover if the thieves or cowboys were returning, or if Pedro were still in the vicinity. They had expected to find him close at hand when they came out of the cave.

"It's plain the rascal has abandoned us," a frown disfiguring the handsome brows. "He's a fine fellow, truly, for a neighbor! But one shouldn't expect too much from men of his stamp. Heigh-ho! I wish the boys were here!"

He was about to descend when a dust-cloud floated from behind the nearest hill and the men for whom he had been wishing came in sight.

"Hurrah!" he cried, hastening down with a reckless disregard for the perils of the way.

The cowboys saw him and drew near at a swinging gallop, Simon at their head.

"You got the mustangs?" and Wingate's eyes were a pair of dancing interrogation points.

"I 'low we did!" was the pleased rejoinder.

Then a quick interchange of information took place; after which Wingate directed that the saddle animals and mustangs be driven into a mesquite grove some distance away and there held secure from the observation of any chance comers.

"I haven't time to explain everything," in reply to the many questions propounded. "I'll tell you all just as soon as things are snug. Half of you go to the grove and hold the animals there, and the others follow me."

Simon seemed somewhat crestfallen when he reached the hiding-place among the rocks and found Nancy Hackett mounted as guard over the bound Mexican.

"I've been practicin' p'intin' at his eye," declared Nancy, with a warlike pride in the brilliancy of her achievements. "But law! I'm afeard if he should 'a' made a break I couldn't 'a' hit it. These hyer pistols is as onreliable as some men I know!"

This last was a fling at the Bu'ster who, abashed by her unexpected presence, was fiddling nervously with his hat, and seemed undecided whether to accept her inevitable companionship or fly from the place.

"Get down here!" the foreman peremptorily commanded. "You are as conspicuous as a church steeple."

It was an order not to be disobeyed, and Sim descended into the screening crevice, breathing very hard but uttering no words of rebellion.

Then, when the entire party were safely ensconced, Wingate told them of the discovery of the cave and of his plans. If the Mexican had spoken truly some members of the robber band could be expected to appear at any moment. They were to be allowed to descend to the water's edge, then menaced with rifles and ordered to surrender.

"It strikes me as a good way to get at the secret of this thieving. It's been going on for some time, and I'm certain there are some men connected with it with whom we are acquainted. I have pumped our new friend, the peon, but he's as mute as a clam. Perhaps he don't know anything. If he does he won't tell it."

The cowboys were jubilant at the prospect of capturing some of the men who had given them so much trouble. There was small likelihood that any of those who had taken to the rocks when the mustangs became tangled in the vines would be able to reach the cave that night, for it was now well on toward evening. But the taking of any of the band was worth striving for.

Few of the cowboys had dreamed that any of the thieves might belong to their own locality. Wingate's statement, therefore, produced something of a sensation and evoked a considerable amount of quiet comment.

The siege was a most monotonous one. Scant heed was paid to the Mexican as the laggard hours dragged wearily. On his part he seemed half-asleep, though his snaky eyes took in every movement, and occasionally a vengeful look came into his face.

The coming of nightfall produced no change in the situation. A supper of hard bread and uncooked meat was served, and washed down with some water stealthily obtained from the river. Suddenly the startling announcement was made that the peon had vanished. His bonds had been loosed to allow him freedom to eat, and as was supposed had not afterward been properly secured.

"Just as well give the thing over, now," announced Wingate, somewhat bitterly. "Perhaps it don't matter. I've been haunted for some time by the idea that that rascally Pedro has already managed to give the thieves warning. It's very strange, otherwise, why they have remained away."

All efforts at secrecy were now abandoned, and an adjournment was made to the mesquite grove.

The river was still high, but was deemed fordable. Nancy was given one of the strongest and most manageable of the animals; and thus reassured followed safely in the foreman's wake. Some trouble was had in getting the mustangs across, but it was accomplished in due time, and the little party rested that night on the American side of the river.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STATE OF DISQUIET.

ON the return journey to the ranch, the following day, they met the force of the cowboys which Huntington had started to their assistance. To the charge of these were committed the mustangs, with instructions to take them to Hunter's.

The greater part of two days was occupied in the homeward trip. Wingate found the place in a state of outward order and inward confusion. The two or three cowboys left at home had gathered in as many cattle as they could, and were herding them on the closely-eaten pastures near the ranch buildings. Huntington, himself, was shut up in his little office, studying a map of the surrounding counties and making mysterious marks on it here and there.

He was thus occupied when the foreman called to give a detailed account of the recent expedition.

The usual carelessness of attitude and manner had disappeared and there were lines of perplexity on the cattle baron's good-humored, brown face.

"I'm glad you've got back!" with a sigh of relief, as Wingate entered the room. "I intend to change the location of the ranch, and am bothered to death to know where to go."

The statement was such an astonishing one and so incomprehensible that the foreman sunk into a chair without being able to utter a word. A cloud of queries oppressed him. Why should Huntington want to remove his ranch? There

was not a better location on the lower Rio Grande.

The cattle baron apparently comprehended the feelings of his foreman.

"It's too long a story to tell, and there are some details I don't care to enter into. But I've been annoyed beyond measure recently by certain threats and rudenesses of Sheriff Irwin. So intolerable have they become that I have determined to make a change rather than endure them longer. I've been thinking that at the point where Pinone Creek empties into the river would be a good place to locate."

He pushed the map toward Wingate and pointed to a spot marked thereon.

"It crowds us further up into the Greaser country and away from the markets," was the foreman's rejoinder. "Otherwise it ought to be nearly as good a place as this. I think it would be my choice if a change has to be made."

Huntington was pleased with this ready concurrence.

"I've already written to a friend of mine who will, I think, be glad to pay something for the water-right here, and for the corrals and buildings."

"I should think he ought!" and the foreman's tones showed his disapproval of the whole business. "Of course, I don't understand the affair, and have no desire to advise if I did; but it strikes me that I'd never pull up stakes for a man like Irwin."

His looks belied his words and indicated that he thought he comprehended the moving cause fully. That fierce combat with the ranchman still rankled in his mind; and he believed the acts which had led to that, or similar ones, had brought Huntington to his present resolve.

Wingate's ready agreement to the Pinone Creek location brought a sense of relief to the cattle baron. So he put away the map and began to question concerning the vents of the trip. The report was an interesting one, and when the talk ended and Wingate turned to go, Huntington was in a much more comfortable frame of mind.

As the foreman passed through the corridor the rays of a lamp streamed across his way, coming from the sitting-room. There was work outside demanding his attention, but he could not resist the impulse to turn aside from duty for a few minutes' conversation with Mildred.

"You are slow in paying your devoirs," she said, half petulantly. "You forget, sir, that you have been gone fully a week!"

The words were lightly spoken and accompanied with a smile, but exhibited, nevertheless, a certain nervousness and anxiety.

"Your pardon, please!" bowing with mock humility. "You have missed me, then? I should never have dreamed it."

"You have been talking with father! Sit down and tell me what he said."

It was an invitation the ranch foreman was glad to accept.

"There isn't much to tell. It seems he has had some trouble with Irwin, and is planning to move the ranch to the Pinone Creek range."

"I presume you know why?" questioningly.

"In a limited sense only."

"Irwin has been here twice since you left. Each time I refused to see him. Instead of going away, he had a long talk with father—and I can't tell you how father looked afterward! All the life and strength seemed to have been taken out of him. And mother, too! She has been going about the house like a ghost."

These were startling details, and Wingate was sorely perplexed and distressed.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"I don't know. Neither father nor mother has ventured to speak to me on the subject, and I haven't had the courage to broach it to them. If they wanted to take me into their confidence, they surely would do so of their own accord."

The foreman was trying to think what this strange state of affairs could mean.

"I can't make anything of it," he confessed. "My first thought was that Irwin had been trying to press his attentions upon you, and failing to gain your willing consent, had endeavored to solicit the good offices of your father. But that doesn't appear to tally with these other things. If that were all there is in it, there would be no occasion to move to Pinone Creek or any other country. He could simply tell Irwin to go back to his ranch and mind his own business—and would have no reason to give the matter a further thought."

Tears were in Mildred's eyes, and her grief and anxiety were so manifest, that Wingate was emboldened to draw her to him in a lover-like embrace.

"Of one thing I am sure," he declared, kiss-

ing her upturned face, "and that is that, though there seems much to perplex, everything is sure to come out right by and by. Irwin is a grand scoundrel—a much worse man than we have ever thought. He would not hesitate a moment at any baseness. It is quite evident your father fears and hates him. Perhaps he thinks Irwin may attempt his life or your abduction; and therefore wishes to leave this section."

"But such fears are utterly baseless. I have good reason to think nothing of the kind will or can be attempted. I have come into certain knowledge which, as soon as proper proofs can be procured, will quickly wind up his career of deviltry. This is an assurance in which you may feel secure."

Mildred clung to him shiveringly, an occasional moan testifying to her anguish of spirit. Her lover's words were helpful and comforting, but they could not drive from her mind the fear of some impending calamity. The explanations were not wholly in accord with her knowledge of her father's character. He was easy-going in disposition, but his Southern blood was quickly aroused by antagonisms or impositions.

She did not put her words in thoughts, however. There was such a sense of restfulness in simply listening to the tones of Wingate's voice! At he could only be near her always to thus cheer and console, the troubles and griefs of life would lose their poignancy.

"I did not speak to your father of this," he continued, after waiting a moment for a reply. "I thought it best to wait a day or two. In the mean time I want to look a little into Mr Irwin's record and get together the proofs I mentioned. And, now, I must be going. Keep up your spirits, my dear, for all is certain to come out right in the end."

She arose and walked with him to the door, bade him good-by with her usual sweetness and calmness; then, when he was gone, returned to her former position, where she spent hours in trying to solve the mystery of her father's actions.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ENIGMA OF A NIGHT.

THE cattle which had been collected were sent away the next day to the new range on the Pinone, notwithstanding the foreman's appeal for delay. He was not yet ready to reveal his plans to Huntington, and the latter showed no desire to return to the subject of the previous night. Hence the foreman could only urge the postponement of the drive in general terms.

Nancy Hackett had been forced to remain over night at the ranch, but in the gray of the early morning she borrowed a broncho and started for Irwin's, declaring she intended to make him "tired" of her than ever. During her stay she had spoken to neither Mildred nor Simon.

On her arrival at Irwin's she found Pedro going about as if nothing had occurred to disturb his usual lazy serenity. She received some black looks from Juanita, however, which she took pleasure in returning with interest.

"I see yer ol' man's got back," she commented, seating herself complacently in the doorway of the kitchen. "Me an' him had enough adventures together to nighabout make a book. Is'pose he's tol' you of 'em."

Juanita maintained an imperturbable silence. "Twas real funny, some on't—specially when Pedro got skeered and jumped into the river. I cal'late he hain't had such a wettin' an' washin' since the day he was born."

She rattled on for half an hour; and, failing to arouse any apparent interest in the apathetic senora, she went out to where Pedro was sleepily currying Irwin's favorite riding animal. She succeeded better here. Pedro would ruffle his brows now and then, and hurl Spanish epithets at her, to her great amusement.

"I'll haf to watch that there Pedro," she muttered, as she left him. "He looked knives and daggers at me if any man ever did. He ain't any too good to stick one of them wicked stilettos into my back, if he gits a chance. I wouldn't put anything past him, after what he's done. That's what I wouldn't!"

The ranchman was not at all pleased when he came in that afternoon and found her there. He had been out on the range with some of his men, and they brought a bunch of cattle in with them.

"I thought you had left," he asserted, staring ruefully at her.

"No, I didn't leave; an' I wouldn't 'a' come back neither, if they'd 'a' been any place else fer

me to go. But they jes' wasn't, an' what could a poor creeter do?"

"Well, why don't you stay at Huntington's where they want you, instead of coming here where we don't want you? If you were not a woman I'd horsewhip you; and I've a good mind to do it, anyway!"

His rage was sudden and terrible, and there was something back of it that made Miss Hackett quail.

"I don't mean to stay any longer than a day or two," she promised. "I jes' come to get my things, an' help Juanita a little, an' then I'm a goin' some'eres. I don't know jes' where; but I can't stay hyer, an' I won't stay at t'other place."

There was something so piteous, yet defiant in her tones that Irwin looked at her curiously as if half recalling some black thought.

"See that you do!" he said, shaking his stock-whip savagely. "The sooner you go the better you'll please me—and I've no doubt Pedro and Juanita."

From this stormy scene Miss Hackett fled to the kitchen, where, in spite of Juanita's glum looks, she insisted on making herself useful.

"I jes' can't abear to set around when they's things a-needin' to be done," she explained. "If they's anything I do hate it's shif'lessness."

And all the while her thoughts were busy with the manner in which Irwin had greeted her. When uttering his fiercest threats there had been in his eye a light that terrified her. It meant far more than the words he spoke. It meant that if she tarried long she would fall a victim to the knife of an assassin.

She was not reassured, therefore, when she noticed Irwin and Pedro in close conversation, an hour or so later. The sight caused her breath to come quickly.

"I won't darst to sleep a wink this night," she thought, clutching the little revolver in the pocket of her dress. "An' I 'low I'd better go away to-morrer. They ain't thinkin' about me in a way that I'm likin'."

She kept her fears well concealed, and gave no inkling of her resolves as she continued her work in the kitchen. But that night, after she had retreated to the little room assigned her and was presumably asleep she slipped out into the darkness. She carried with her a dark comforter, on which she made her bed in the shadow of a near building and narrowly watched the house from which she had fled.

She was more than half persuaded that Pedro, at Irwin's command, would attempt to slay her that night, and she knew of no better way to foil his purpose.

"That there place is a reg'lar rat-trap!" she grumbled, referring to her little room in the house. "With an inimy in the door, they wouldn't be no way o' gittin' out. I ain't much of a shooter, specially when I'm asleep; and that Pedro could wrop a blanket 'round a body's head 'fore they could do anything. I declare, he's as mean as pu'sley!"

She was almost crying from vexation. The isolation and friendlessness of her position pressed strongly on her at that moment. On all that ranch there was no one to whom she could go for a word of advice or consolation. Yet she had no doubt there were many brave men there, and brave men are usually chivalrous. To these she resolved to appeal in case of necessity. In the open air she could make herself heard; and she believed that they would not see her injured when they knew her defenselessness.

So wrought upon were her nerves she could not have slept even had she desired. It was sad that she was so disturbed, for she was little given to the depressions and melancholies which afflict many of her sex. On the contrary, the courageous undercurrent of her nature was decidedly masculine.

Crouching on the dark comforter in the somber shadow of the building she narrowly watched the place she had quitted and gave instant heed to every sound of the night. The deep breathing of some cattle near, the vicious squealing of some combating horses in the corral, and the cry of a nocturnal bird alone broke the oppressive stillness.

It was past midnight before there was any stir about the ranch buildings. Then three men came from the adobe bunk-house. A little thrill ran through Miss Hackett as she noted the stealthiness of their movements. But, instead of proceeding toward the room that she had occupied, they turned in the direction of the branding-chute, which stood at a little distance from the horse-corral.

"Whatever can they be up to?" Nancy asked herself, rising to a sitting posture and staring

after the shadowy figures. "I'd take my 'davy that one of them is Irwin; and what he wants to go slidin' round on his own ranch like a thief in the night is more'n I know."

So great was her curiosity that she finally ventured to steal after the men, though in so doing she realized the was running perilous risks. There had been murder in the heart of Irwin, that afternoon, and should he detect her spying on his movements, she felt sure he would not hesitate to put the thought into action.

The sky was overcast, rendering the night just dark enough for her purpose. When the branding-chute was reached, the men halted and one of them proceeded to kindle a fire in the little sheet-iron stove used by the branders in heating their irons. The flickering light from the half-open door of the stove fell occasionally on the men's faces, revealing their identity. She had already recognized one—the others were Pedro and a companion of similar low instincts.

Miss Hackett had dropped to the ground when the men halted. Her recumbent position brought into plain relief the chute, together with the wing corral into which were driven the cattle to be branded. Before the fire was well under way Irwin and the cowboy disappeared, returning after a little with a dozen steers from the bunch which had been brought in that afternoon.

These were driven between the barbed-wire wings leading to the chute, and there guarded by the cowboy, while Irwin returned to where Pedro was blowing and puffing over the glowing coals.

It was plain even to Nancy's bewildered comprehension that the cattle had been brought there for branding. But, what the ranchman meant by proceeding about the business in this sneak-thief fashion was not so plain.

In a short time one of the irons was withdrawn from the stove, its red-hot points tracing fiery characters against the black background, as Pedro walked with it to the platform overlooking the chute. At the same time some of the steers were crowded into the narrowing passage. At the point where Pedro stood there was scarcely room for one to squeeze through; and as each pressed by he thrust the glowing letters against its flank.

When the iron cooled a second was produced; and in a short time the dozen steers were branded. Then they were driven into a small inclosure not far away, after which Irwin and Pedro returned to the bunk-house.

Miss Hackett was about to creep back to her position in the lee of the building. The strangeness of all she had seen kept her still, however; and when she saw the cowboy approach the horse corral she was glad she had not been too hasty in beating a retreat.

She saw him bring out and saddle a horse. Then he released the newly-branded cattle from the inclosure and drove them away into the night.

"What kin it mean?" Miss Hackett queried, again and again as she retraced her way.

There was no plausible answer.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FINAL BLOW.

"It will take a good deal of work to get things in as good shape as they are down yonder!"

One of the old smiles, which it was pleasurable to see, lit up the bronzed features of the cattle baron. He was sitting in his saddle, or rather half out of it, for one massive leg was thrust straight downward into the stirrup, while the other was crossed lazily over the seat. The expression had been called forth by a survey of the new location at Pinone Creek.

Almost a week had elapsed since his interview with the ranch foreman, on the latter's return from the expedition against the mustang stealers. Two installments from the great herd had been driven to the new range, and preparations were under way for bringing a third. At this particular moment Huntington was surveying the proposed site of his buildings.

"But we'll have things nicely fixed after a time; and as for range—we've got about the whole county."

The mere fact that miles lay between him and the cruel face of Irwin seemed to revive his old elasticity and restore the former buoyancy of his laugh.

"Hello! Somebody's a-comin'," said the cowboy, to whom he was talking, nodding his head toward where three or four horsemen had appeared from behind the mesquite. "Some of our new neighbors comin' to scrape up an acquaintance, likely."

Huntington twisted about in his saddle and stared curiously in the direction indicated. Almost immediately a shade came over his face.

One of the forms was familiar. Yes, there could be no mistaking that. The foremost of the riders was Charles Irwin.

"What does the scoundrel want down this way?" the cattle baron whispered. "I thought I had got out of the line of his travels. Does he mean to pursue and hound me?"

The cowboy now recognized the ranchman, and likewise evinced his surprise, but in words far different. There was another cowboy further down the slope; and he, seeing them staring into space in this curious fashion, came up to ascertain what it meant.

Irwin's party was close at hand by this time. Huntington disdained to return his bow as he came on; and even when he was quite near refrained from looking at him, but glanced instead toward a bunch of cattle that were grazing far down the valley.

Irwin was not pleased at this, and checked the words of greeting which had risen to his lips.

"I haven't much to say, Mr. Huntington," drawing a paper from his pocket and opening it. "It will be short and sweet and to the point. As sheriff of Calaveras county, I have here a warrant for your arrest on the charge of cattle-stealing, and also for the arrest of the men with you."

A fierce, angry light flashed into the eyes of the cattle baron.

"Hold on!" he cried, imperiously. "You scoundrel! this is some vile scheme of yours, and I won't listen to it. The absurdity of it! What! Giles Huntington!—who never knowingly wronged a man in his life?"

He was choking and fuming with rage and astonishment. But Irwin, unheeding his fiery mood, calmly proceeded to read the paper.

"I don't suppose you caught all of that, Mr. Huntington—you are in such a sputter; but, if you will be kind enough to look the warrant over you will see that it's correct in every detail, and issued by proper authority."

Huntington snatched the extended paper from Irwin's hand and scanned it hastily. The sweat came out on his brow and a deep groan broke from his lips.

"Whose cattle are we said to have taken?" he hoarsely questioned.

"Mine!" and the sheriff bowed sardonically. "And the proofs are so plain, Mr. Huntington, even you can't dispute them."

"My God! what foul plot is this? I can't understand it. For myself I could bear anything—but my wife and daughter!"

His explosive mood had passed as quickly as it came, and he now looked white and helpless.

"You do it very well, Giles!" sneered the ranchman. "You must have been practicing at theatricals. And your men seem to have been in similar training."

The latter were scowling blackly at him, and seemed half anxious for a fight.

"I'm sorry to spoil such a neat little lay-out as you have here," glancing over the wide-spreading valley. "It is almost a pity. A better location couldn't have been picked for the work in view."

"I don't understand you," Huntington asserted, with some show of his former feeling.

"Oh, I had forgot that I didn't fully explain matters. You see it's the general belief that you ran a few of your cattle up here to cover your stealing operations. I can't see, though, why this additional disguise should have been deemed necessary. You were certainly succeeding very well, as it was. How many cattle and horses you have managed to run out of the country in the last twelve months I suppose no one knows; but it must have been a good many, as every ranchman has suffered more or less."

"No more of that," cried the cattle baron, wrought up to his former pitch of fury. "Just another word, Irwin, and I'll drop you in your tracks. I can stand a good deal, but not everything. You are making of yourself both judge and jury, and convicting me without a scintilla of evidence."

Irwin quailed before the fire of his glance. "What evidence have you? I asked you that a while ago and you evaded it."

Irwin compressed his lips firmly and cautiously slipped his hand toward his revolver before replying.

"You will doubtless find the evidence in your herds over there, if you'll only take the trouble to look. According to the best of my information the stolen cattle are there; and as I'll have to take them with me as part of the proof, I'll

parole your cowboys and let them go down there with my friends to drive them in."

There was nothing in this to which Huntington could object, and besides he was anxious to see of what the proofs might consist. The fact that cattle from other ranges had drifted among his would amount to nothing. Such things were of common occurrence.

The cattle, comprising nearly a thousand head, were scattered for several miles along the creek valley, and it was a work of hours to bunch them and drive them to the designated point. Irwin attempted to change the current of thought and discuss minor and trivial subjects. But the cattle baron maintained a moody reserve; and finally the former rode to where the heavy ranch-wagon was standing and seated himself in its shade.

When the united herds had been collected for inspection he remounted and with Huntington and the cowboys rode among them looking for the animals alleged to have been stolen.

"There!" he cried, triumphantly, pointing to a young steer. "If that isn't mine, then I don't know my own cattle!"

Each member of the party examined it critically. Apparently there could be no mistake. Irwin's brand was "C I," and Huntington's "G H." Irwin's brand had been covered over and partially concealed by Huntington's. The burns were fresh.

It will readily be seen with what ease this transformation had been effected. The G of the Huntington brand exactly covered the C of the Irwin brand; and the first upright of the H had fallen on the I.

There were a half-dozen of Irwin's cattle whose brands had been thus changed, and an equal number from various other ranges. On the latter the work was not so well done, the covered brands being visible almost at a glance, owing to the fact that they differed so widely from the new brands which had been placed over them.

Huntington was dumfounded at this mute evidence of his guilt. He could make no claim that the cattle were his or that the brands had not been changed. He had no wish to make such a claim.

"It looks black," he confessed, facing the triumphant ranchman bravely. "But I swear before Heaven that I had no knowledge of this thing and am as innocent as a child. And you know it, Irwin, in your inmost heart!"

But at such a time protestations were of no avail. The proofs were against him, and it seemed that nothing but his previous good record could serve him now. He knew he had been entangled in a cunning-laid trap; and it was very natural for him to believe that Irwin knew a great deal more of the matter than he professed. His anger burned hotly; but he managed to keep it in check, and said:

"There's nothing for it, I suppose, but to go with you. You must give me time, though, to make some arrangements for the taking care of these cattle."

Irwin agreed to leave two of his men there; and Huntington and his cowboys accompanied him without further words.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GREAT TRIAL.

THE arrests created a tremendous sensation. Without the aid of telegraphic or mail facilities the startling news spread from ranch to ranch seemingly on the wings of the wind. No one had ever suspected Huntington, but the conclusive character of the evidence forced conviction of his guilt. On the border no greater crimes are known than those with which he was charged; the ranchmen were sore over their heavy losses and smarting to avenge them upon some one; and now that a victim was found they lost their heads and clamored for his life, and the lives of his abettors.

The trial was to be held before the Mexican Don, Porfiero Alcatraz by name, who had by some strange political jugglery been elevated to the position of judge of the new county of Calaveras. Alcatraz was a man of fair intelligence, and had for years been an alcalde in the country of his birth. But it was pretty generally known that he had no great friendship for the cattle baron, and the belief was common that the latter would receive scant mercy at his hands.

On the great day Alcatraz sat in state in the adobe court-room of the little county town of San Ildefonso. The sun was blazing hot, and the square, paved court about the building was crowded with a jostling, sweltering throng, composed of men of every rank and station, from the

warthy, low-browed, ear-ringed Greaser to the stalwart *Americano* who boasted his thousands of cattle and horses.

At the hour appointed Irwin pompously elbowed his way through the throng, bringing with him the prisoners. These were surrounded by a guard, as much for the purpose of humiliating them as for protection against the alleged danger of lynching.

Alcatraz was a stickler for legal formality, as he understood it, and there were many delays consequent thereupon. But after a time the wheels of justice were got in motion and the trial began. There was no difficulty in proving that the cattle with the changed brands had been found in Huntington's possession. It was a fact which the cattle baron did not deny. In truth, so conclusive were all the proofs offered by the prosecution that when the State rested its case there seemed not a loophole of escape for the accused men.

But just at this moment Taylor Wingate, accompanied by Simple Simon and Nancy Hackett entered the room.

There was a lull in the court proceedings and a buzz of expectancy from the crowd, for the very carriage of these new arrivals was prophetic of startling denouements. In the general appearance of Simple Simon there was so marked a change that it attracted universal attention from all who had known him. His slouching gait was gone, the smile of easy, good-humored rusticity had vanished and been replaced by a look of intellectual force and strengthful purpose, and in his eyes had come a glance of sternness and resolution. In addition his ill-fitting cowboy garb had been discarded for clothing that revealed instead of concealed the really manly proportions of his figure.

There was no change in Wingate, except that a look of triumph shone in his face, and in Miss Hackett the change was but slight.

Simple Sim advanced to the desk occupied by Huntington's attorney and whispered for a few moments into that gentleman's ear. The lawyer gave a start, but managed to control his nerves, and announced that the defense was ready with its evidence.

To the surprise of all the first witness called was Nancy. A few deft questions set her on the right track, and she detailed in her own peculiar way the mysterious night branding she had witnessed at Irwin's. The assaults of the prosecutor failed to shake her testimony, and when she retired, to be replaced by Simple Sim, many black and suspicious looks were cast upon the erstwhile arrogant sheriff.

There was a hush of nervous expectancy in the room when the attorney addressed the new witness:

"You will please state to the court your true name and profession."

"Samuel Wilber;—and I am in the employ of the United States revenue service."

"Exactly! And now state, in your own way, why you came here and what you have discovered in connection with this case, if anything?"

Objections were made to the form of the question, but they were over-ruled by Alcatraz, and the witness went on:

"There has been a great deal of smuggling across the border here, and I was ordered to this vicinity to ferret out and arrest the guilty parties, if possible. Miss Hackett I sent on several weeks in advance, and when I arrived I found her at the Huntington Ranch, which I concluded to make my own headquarters."

The prosecutor realizing the dangerous trend of the evidence, here made some hasty and fiery objections, insisting that the statements were irrelevant and immaterial, and that the witness should stick to the case in hand. Similar objections were made constantly as Simon continued, but they were almost uniformly over-ruled by the court and the witness was allowed to tell his full story. A word-for-word repetition would be tedious. Substantially it was as follows:

He had assumed the disguise of a broncho-breaker, being a natural horse-trainer, the better to conceal his identity. He had for some time been engaged with Miss Hackett in the revenue secret service. She was not an educated woman, but had a certain shrewdness, tact and courage that made her invaluable.

Her pretended attachment for him, and her subsequent jealousy, had been mere pretexts—parts of a plan to enable her to take up her residence at Irwin's, where she could keep a close watch on all the ranchman's movements.

In playing their several roles they had been careful to keep their masks on at all times and under all circumstances, as they could never be sure they were not being watched; and this fact, as the reader knows, had saved them many

times from what would otherwise have been inevitable discovery.

He had found abundant evidence to convict Irwin of the charge of smuggling—and this evidence had not been collected without revealing far more. The constant surveillance to which the ranchman had been subjected had disclosed the fact that he was the leader of the band which had been engaged in the cattle and horse-stealing operations of the past year.

When this statement was made, Irwin, who had for some time been edging nearer the door, attempted to pass to the outside.

His movements had not escaped the eagle glance of the detective. Rising in his seat, he threw back his coat, displaying his official badge and shouted:

"In the name of the United States I call on all good citizens to arrest that man! He is trying to leave the court room!"

At this Irwin made a dash for his horse, which was standing just beyond the square, but he was seized, and though he fought madly, was brought back and duly placed under arrest.

No further evidence was asked for. The prosecutor, realizing that his case was lost, and disgusted with the fraud that had been practiced on him, promptly dismissed the cases against Huntington and his cowboys.

And that afternoon another trial took place, wherein Charles Irwin sat in the prisoner's box, and from which, at its conclusion, he went as a convicted felon to serve out many weary years as a penance for the crimes he had committed.

Before the close of this memorable day many other things were revealed which threw the light of explanation on various matters which have seemed strange and enigmatical, and which involved the life history of many connected with this narrative.

The chief of these was that Irwin had been sailing under a false name. Long before, in the days of his early manhood, he had met Mrs. Huntington, who was then a widow, with one child, an infant. This infant was Mildred, now grown to womanhood. Irwin sought the widow's hand in marriage, and had been rejected for his rival, Giles Huntington.

Years after, having changed his name because of offenses against the laws, and being wholly altered in appearance by the flight of time, he chanced to locate on the Rio Grande, where he found the Huntingtons, happy and prosperous. This prosperity and happiness fired his mind with the deepest hatred. He saw that all thought and recollection of himself had vanished, and so with diabolical wiles and schemes he set about a work of revenge.

Mildred's father had not been a man of which a daughter could be proud; and she had been reared in the belief that Huntington was her father. Her real father had perished for wrongdoing, and Mrs. Huntington could not bear that Mildred should ever know of him or have the stain of his offenses thrust upon her young life to blight it. This had come to Irwin's knowledge; and the revelation of this to Mildred was the threat with which he had annoyed and attempted to coerce the cattle baron.

The white face revealed beneath the feathered head-dress of the supposed Comanche raider had set Simon on the right track. He had taken Wingate into his confidence, and they, with Nancy's aid, had collected and pursued the clues which had led to Irwin's downfall.

Of course there was a wedding! It is the proper ending of true love; and no truer love existed than that which knit the hearts of Taylor Wingate and Mildred Huntington. The cattle driven to Pinone Creek were returned to the old ranges; the right triumphed, and prosperity smiled.

And the hero who wrought these changed circumstances was the Broncho-Buster and "Fool of the Range," the dauntless Scout-Detective, Sam Wilber!

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
98 William Street New York.